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By Milton Lesser

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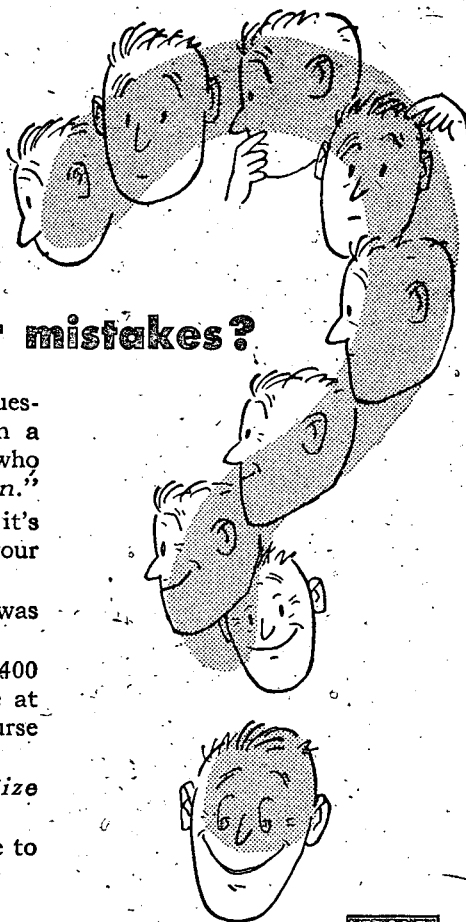
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— All STORIES Complete —

FORTY DAYS HAS SEPTEMBER (Novel—26,000) by Milton Lesser..... 8

Illustrated by Frank Navarro

"Earthmen: get off your planet!" So the newspaper advertisement read, and it got a big laugh—until children grew beards and the law of gravity went crazy....

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For years Kent had looked forward to returning to Earth, where life had reached a peak of perfection. Only to find there's such a thing as too much civilization...

Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones,

illustrating a scene from "Forty Days Has September"

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The

OBSERVATORY

by the Editor

IN THE September *Amazing Stories* we more or less casually mentioned that the next item for discussion in the Reader's Forum would be "long stories vs more stories per issue." Within *four days* after the magazine went on sale, we received over two hundred letters on the subject! Such a response made the argument over "sex" on the covers pale to insignificance by comparison. Evidently a great many readers had held opinions on the subject of story length, but needed an invitation to air them.

IN TABULATING the returns on this point, to date, we've learned that a preference for a good long novel to lead off each issue runs about four to one over our presenting a selection of short stories. But—and here's the rub as far as we're concerned—by a vote of nearly ten to one our readers turned thumbs down on serials. Some expressions on that score got downright violent, just to make sure we wouldn't make the error of putting "to be continued" at the very spot in the story where the reader was gnawing his nails!

CLEARLY, this kind of reader ultimatum was not to be lightly dismissed. So the staffs of *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures* held a joint meeting on what to do about it. First, it was decided, in fairness to the twenty percent who wanted a variety of short stories, we could not simply stick in a fifty or sixty thousand word lead novel and two or three short-stories to fill out an issue—nor could we run a twenty thousand word "novel" and satisfy the eighty percent majority. One editor suggested we cut out, or at least down, the "filler" articles but we remembered the storm of protest that followed such an attempt a couple of years back—so that was out.

FINALLY we arrived at a plan of action which we think will please majority and minority alike. We called in some of our writers and sent letters out to those who live too far away for easy commuting. We told them what we wanted, and verbally or by return mail came the agreements to follow this new "policy". Naturally, the changeover can't be immediate, but it will

come just as quickly as our writers can make the switch.

WHAT IS this "plan of action?" We can best answer that by giving you a sort of preview to what has already been arranged. Very soon now you'll find a 40,000 word novel leading off an issue of *Amazing Stories*. Written by Walter M. Miller, Jr., whose "Secret of the Death Dome" and "Dark Benediction" brought paens of praise from many readers, this new novel has everything: purposeful action, sparkling dialogue, vivid description and all the other attributes that go to make up the kind of satisfying and exciting fiction you'll remember.

BUT THAT'S only one of the phases in our new plans. Coming to you shortly will be a 60,000 word novel in the form of a "duology" (that's like a trilogy, only two complete stories about the same characters, instead of three). This will appear in two issues, 30,000 words to each, each of them a complete story with no dangling ends. That way, if you should miss one or the other, you won't be left with a feeling of frustration. Both stories, however, will be about the same people and their problems, and together they'll form as rewarding a reading experience as you're likely to come across in science fiction.

THE AUTHOR of this duology is a newcomer to science fiction, bringing to the medium a fresh and shining talent which will endear him to you right off the bat! His name is John Bloodstone; and if you're an admirer of such stories as Burroughs' "The Gods of Mars", "The Princess of Mars", etc., you'll find Bloodstone's work right up there in the same league. We know these are not words of praise to be lightly spoken—just as our regular readers have learned that your editor is not given to going all out over second-rate talent.

AND THAT, fellow fans, is a preview of what's coming to the pages of the Old Aristocrat—and soon! All because a great many of you took the time and trouble to write your preferences to your editors. Any other suggestions?

—HB

PIONEER TO VENUS *By Salem Lane*

GRATEFULLY, Jerry Lennon felt the clutch of acceleration taking hold. The weeks of weightless nausea were over, the sickening, soul-wrenching absence of gravity was going. The decelerating rockets of the Venusian-bound *Stellar IV* were operating.

Nobody in the cramped little cabin spoke. Each was occupied with his thoughts. Jerry glanced at Fehler, the powerfully-built ex-boxer. What was going on in his mind? But he didn't ask. Privacy was respected, even the privacy of keeping quiet and thinking to yourself.

Jerry stretched back on the metal-framed bunk. His cramped stomach muscles gradually relaxed as the acceleration increased. He knew they'd keep it at one grav until the landing. Abruptly, Olsen in the lower bunk sat up. He glanced at his wrist watch.

"Four hours to go," he said to no one in particular.

"I wonder what it's like," Jerry said. Nobody answered, so he kept quiet.

He'd had momentary pangs of hesitancy all through the trip, from take-off that cold February morning until now. Why had he left that soft job, he asked himself, to settle in what the books called "the God-forsaken stink that is Venus?" He wasn't really the adventurous type—but then he wasn't an adventurer—he was a pioneer!

The videos he'd seen of Venus had attracted him all right. There men were building a world! Jerry laughed half-aloud when he thought how dramatic the phrase sounded.

"What's the matter, kid?" Olsen asked suddenly.

"Nothing," Jerry answered, "I was just thinking."

"Well don't think too hard, kid. You're gonna work."

Jerry didn't reply. He knew he was going to work. Didn't his file state "electronician, first class?" Didn't he know servomechanisms and remote controls like his own name? They needed mechanics of all kinds in the Colonies. Venus City was blossoming fast.

They went through the jarring of the landing, not so different from the take-off, and when the shock subsided, Jerry sensed the motionlessness of the rocket. He was on Venus! The communicator barked suddenly, its tinny voice filling the room with harsh sound:

"...Occupants of all cabins, eight through twenty...attention...gather all personal gear...stow in bag and carry to landing exit port...you will follow assigned guards to sleeping barracks for assignments, immunization, and general orientation tomorrow...."

Jerry was as quick as his room companions, and they were all through the door into the corridor, narrow and pipe-filled. Stooping and grunting, they joined other groups walking toward the exit ports. Jerry couldn't refrain from one last glance at the little cubicle which had housed them through the trip. In a way, he thought, it was funny: they hadn't left that space once, till now.

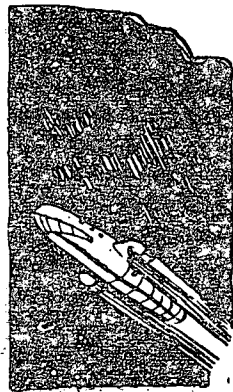
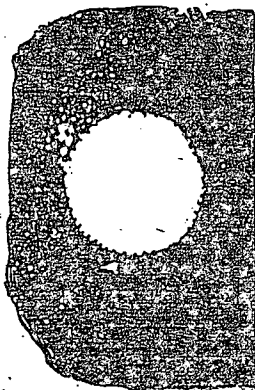
Through the open port, Jerry could see a brilliant light, obviously the landing lights. Overpoweringly strong, an odor was sweeping into the ship, along the corridor. It was less an odor, than a stench, a stench compounded of fish and the sea, and fertility and decay. It was rank and malodorous, sweeping brinily and headily into your nostrils. Jerry knew that this was the "Venusian smell"—at least the old-timers called it that.

And then he was swept in the pressing group to the debarkation ramp. He got his first glimpse of Venus.

But he didn't see much.

Everywhere, there was confusion and noise, the shouting of orders, the clang of metal, the flicker of lights and torches. It was orderly confusion.

As Jerry walked down the ramp toward the long low buildings which were the barracks and which would be his first home on Venus, he looked back again at the towering symbol of the rocket. The Venusian night was damp and warm and dark, the odor was everywhere and the rocket seemed to blend in with the background. Just for a minute he felt a pang of homesickness, a tiny twinge of fear—and then it was gone. Resolutely he turned his head away and marched with the group. He was a pioneer. He was a Venusian colonist. He was going to build a world...





I was facing Hadman and violent death, when suddenly this cloud swooped low and grabbed me

By Milton Lesser



40 DAYS HAS SEPTEMBER

When Nature went nuts in this small town, was it meant as a warning to the rest of Earth?

I STOOD in line with about a dozen other guys, and I felt foolish. They were of all sizes and shapes, but most of them were big. Me, I'm big too, six-foot-one and pushing two hundred pounds, but my stomach was grumbling ominously because I'd had exactly one doughnut and a cup of black coffee for breakfast. If I didn't get this job, I wouldn't have that much tomorrow morning.

Promptly at nine, the woman came in. She wore one of those severely tailored suits popular these days, but it didn't hide a thing. Tall and lithe, with green eyes and hair the color of rich red wine, she made us all stop our fidgeting and look at her.

And looking, we started to fidget all over again. She was like that.

"Good morning," she said, raking us over with those green eyes. "I'm Hadman. I'm supposed to do the staring, not you. Will you extend your right arms and flex the muscles, please?"

We all did what we were told, and I don't know about the others, but I felt foolish again. The woman came down the line, placing her hand over each extended biceps briefly, then moving on. She was very efficient. In a couple of minutes, she dismissed half a dozen unsatisfactory applicants who left the room, grumbling.

"You're all strong," Hadman told the rest of us, "but some of you might be muscle-bound. I don't want that." She dug into a desk drawer, brought out a length of rope, throwing it to the first man in line.

"Skip," she said.

"What say?"

"I said, skip. Skip rope."

Just like that, and he skipped. When the rope came to me, I did a good job of it. Before I'd decided that flashing leather could make a battered, unlovely hulk of your face, I'd been a club fighter, and rope work came naturally.

When we finished, Hadman sent all but two of us home. "Very well," she said. "You're hired. Will one hundred dollars per week be satisfactory?"

I looked at the other fellow, a gaunt, sandy-haired individual with big ears and a homely face. He was smiling.

"It'll be fine," I told the woman. "But what do we do?"

"I'll get to that. Let me finish. A hundred a week for one of you, a hundred and fifty for the other. Which one of you is stronger?"

"How in hell should I know, lady?" said the gaunt man, honestly enough.

"Well, I intend to find out. One of you will have to give orders to the other. I won't have you acting out of concert. Your first job is a simple one: I want you to fight."

"Who?" I said.

"Why, each other, of course. The stronger man gets the extra fifty dollars a week. Let's go now, start fighting."

I just stood there, open-mouthed. She couldn't be serious. My companion grinned. "I can't fight this man. I have nothing against him."

"That doesn't matter," Hadman assured him. "First place, I have to see who's stronger. Also, when I give an order I want you to obey it instantly, no questions asked. Now, fight. Remember, fifty dollars a week extra for the man who wins."

THE GAUNT man shook his head helplessly, lunging toward me and swinging half-heartedly with his right hand. I stepped back, and the blow barely brushed my forehead, more a slap than a punch.

"Hey!" I said. "You're not serious. You're not going to listen to her—"

"Hit him back," Hadman told me. "Don't just stand still."

"She's the boss," my companion said, swinging again. I caught his fist with my hand this time, pushing him away. I was feeling more ridiculous all the time. He'd swing, I'd duck away and wait for him to swing again. Hadman stood off in a corner yelling for us to fight.

Many a good street brawl starts that way, with a couple of guys pawing awkwardly at each other. Before you know it, they're not pawing any more but charging in lustily.

It was like that with us, and maybe in the backs of our minds someplace was the knowledge of an extra fifty bucks a week. Anyway, when I brought a left hook around the way it should be brought around, and when he caught it squarely on the jaw and shook it off without going down, I knew I had a fight on my hands.

We stood toe to toe and slugged for

a while, leering recklessly like a couple of kids. Hadman cried her approval, and when the gaunt man almost put me down for the count with a good right cross that landed a shade too high on my cheek, I stopped feeling ridiculous.

I weaved away to catch my breath like old Jersey Joe, but the gaunt man didn't give me a chance. He waded in on top of me, pouring lefts and rights at my body. That was his mistake—he got too cocky and lowered his guard.

Splat! This time the left hook jarred him and I was lucky. I felt a couple of knuckles crunch and knew my left hand would be good for nothing but wiping claret away from my nose after that. I crossed the right from someplace below and behind my belt buckle, and that ended it. The gaunt man shot up stiff and straight like a ramrod and his eyes went glassy. He tottered for a moment, then fell backwards, crashing into a desk and upending a typewriter. He stopped only when he lay flat on the floor with no place else to fall.

HADMAN brought a glass of water from the cooler and sprinkled his face with it. Soon he was sitting up groggily, but he didn't try to stand. His smile was rueful.

Hadman turned to me. "You get the one-fifty," she said. "That was a lovely demonstration." She patted my shoulder like you might pat a horse after it had run a race.

I felt like hell. My left hand ached, and I could tell it was swelling. My nose was bleeding and I had a cut over one of my eyes. "I'm glad you think it was lovely," I told her. "I think you're nuts."

"Don't you want the job?"

"Damned right I want it. But I still think you're nuts."

She shrugged. "You can think what

you want as long as you're prepared to obey me to the letter. Are you?"

"For a hundred and fifty bucks? Sure. Only, what do we do?"

"I'll let you know. According to his application, the man on the floor is Angus McDougle. You're Paul Rardon. Angus—Paul."

I stuck out a hand and helped Angus to his feet. "Hello, Angus, I'm sorry—"

"What for? It was a fair fight, so forget it." For some reason, we both were embarrassed. That's something I learned later: all men are a little embarrassed in front of Hadman. She's too beautiful.

Now she began counting off orders on her fingers. "First, you get a week's pay in advance. I want both of you to get some decent clothing. What you're wearing is a little torn just now. Second, you can have a good meal, say goodbye to friends, anything you want. We're leaving New York tonight. Third, you're due at LaGuardia Airfield at three this afternoon. I'll meet you then."

She turned her back and busied herself at one of the desks. I looked at Angus, Angus looked at me, and we headed for the door after Hadman gave us a thick roll of fresh new bills.

On our way out we bumped into a man wearing a dignified gray business suit. "Office of the building," he muttered. "What's all the commotion in here?"

I thumbed him toward Hadman. "Ask the boss, Mister." I didn't doubt in the slightest that Hadman would handle him effortlessly.

I GOT TO the general administration building at LaGuardia by two-thirty, and since Hadman neglected to specify any particular airline, I bought a newspaper and sat down to read it. After we'd cleaned up, purchased our clothing and eaten in a

good restaurant, Angus had gone to say goodbye to a girl he knew. So I got to the airport early.

I'm a little fed up with the international news. It appears like the Commies are trying to do all over again what Hitler and his gang tried to do a few years back. I lit a cigarette and skipped over the news section, but I don't think I'd have done that had I known then what this Hadman business was all about. Maybe I was lucky, because it gave me a few more hours of sanity.

Anyway, I leafed through the paper until I came to the personals column. Try it sometime; it's a good way to kill time. "Come home, George. Mother went back to Reading and all is forgiven", or "Do you think chewing tobacco is old-fashioned? Try Dr. Peters'—special to readers of this column", or "I'm looking for a real Florentine chess set. Any offers?"

You get the idea. But one ad was so peculiar that I did a double-take and looked at it twice, then read it a third time to make sure my eyes weren't playing tricks. It said:

EARTHMEN, YOU'RE EVICTED!

This notice is appearing today, August 15th, in every major newspaper in every major city in the world.

We, the Overlords, have come home. Unfortunately, you've done a botch job here on Earth, but still we're willing to give you transportation anyplace in the Galaxy.

We mean business, and resistance would be futile. To see just how true this is, watch what happens within the next few weeks in what we have chosen as a typical city, Merryville, Kansas, U. S. A.

*signed, Diuniun, Overlord,
Sector 13*

I was aware of someone leaning over my shoulder—Hadman.

"I see you're early, Paul. Been reading the announcement?"

"What announcement? Oh, you mean this crazy ad?"

"Yes, that's the one." She sat down and took a cigarette when I offered it, crossing her legs and looking prettier than ever in that attractive suit.

"Don't tell me you believe it?" I laughed.

She looked at me severely. "It isn't funny. Naturally I believe it, and I should know, Paul. Well, never mind—you'll see."

I felt like telling Hadman she was crazy again, but when Hadman looks at you a certain way with those cold green eyes, you don't tell her anything of the sort. It unsettles you, makes you nervous, or at times it makes you feel like the race horse that just won. It's all according to Hadman's mood.

Angus found us at three-o-five, and Hadman scowled at him for being five minutes late. It was funny, Angus actually cringed.

"It won't happen again," he assured her, and I think he meant it. "My cab got tied up in traffic. Then there was the matter of a pretty girl who didn't want to see me leave—"

"That's over and done with," Hadman said. "From now on, you and Paul are my bodyguards. Nothing else counts, not even your private lives. Shall we go?"

Bodyguards. Then that was it. But what on earth did Hadman have to fear? A rich, eccentric dame—could that be all there was to it?

"Where are we going?" Angus wanted to know.

"A small city in Kansas," said Hadman. "Name of Merryville." She didn't bat an eyelash when I peered at the fantastic advertisement again.

Merryville, Kansas. Funny how the pieces of a puzzle can fit together so readily but still yield nothing which makes sense....

HADMAN took Merryville by storm. In that first hectic week, L began to see just why she might need a couple of bodyguards, and more than once I almost wanted to get the hell off her payroll while the getting was good.

We got to Merryville on a Wednesday, and on Thursday afternoon we paid a visit to Twin Oaks Inn, the town's only nightclub, which turned out to be more a glorified roadhouse than anything else.

A couple of flunkies were swabbing down the dance floor for the night's activities. Off to the left, a girl in slacks, looking a little faded and old without makeup, was pecking away at a tiny piano and singing the lyrics of a popular song, tuning up for the evening. Three or four men stood at the bar drinking beer, and the barman was wiping down the stained oak surface with a big dirty dishcloth.

I leaned my elbows on the bar and ordered a beer. Angus stood with his arms folded across his chest and Hadman said: "Who owns this place?"

Everyone turned to look at her. They must have liked what they saw, because they kept on staring.

"I said, who owns this place?"

The bar man, a scrawny guy with a sallow face and a long crooked nose, said: "Name of Joaquin, Enrico de San Joaquin. Everyone calls him Joker, but not to his face. He owns a lot of things besides this here nightclub, and he ain't here now. You want a beer too?"

"No, I would like to meet Mr. Joaquin."

"You're looking at him now," someone said. The voice was quiet, cul-

tured, but it was hard around the edges. The man stood in a doorway off to the right of the bar. He wore a white linen suit, very expensive and very clean, and his face above it was handsome in a dark, swarthy way. "I'm Joaquin, Miss—ah..."

"Hadman."

"Hadman. An odd name. Is that your first or last? Is it Hadman something, or Miss Hadman?"

"Just Hadman. My friends and I would like to see you, in private."

JOAQUIN looked at Angus briefly, at me even more briefly, but his smouldering eyes stayed on Hadman a long time and he said, "Very well. Will you step this way?"

The office was big, with a huge marble-topped desk in front of the picture window. This Joaquin did all right for himself.

"So they call you Joker," Hadman observed.

Joaquin looked up quickly, but she met his eyes with an innocent smile, and he melted before it. Right there, Hadman wanted to show who was boss, and didn't come off second best.

Joaquin shrugged. "It's because of my propensity for gambling. I've always thought that if you let people call you something behind your back, they have you at a disadvantage. But it doesn't work that way at all, and sometimes it pays to have them think so. Now, what do you want?"

Hadman smiled. "Why, I want a job."

"What can you do?"

"Suppose you tell me, Joker. I can do a lot of things."

"Call me Enrico, please. Umm-mm."

He looked her up and down carefully, trying to do it without heat. Her trim tanned calves below the bolero skirt, her supple waist, her high-arched breasts under the light summer blouse,



Paul Reardon

her too-beautiful face. His eyes were very bright when he finished.

"Yes, a lot of things," he mused. I've said that Hadman could make men nervous, but she did more than that to Joaquin. He struck me, anyway, as a lustful, passionate man who hid it all under a cool, unruffled surface. But it was all veneer and Hadman could strip it away like so much putty.

Joaquin came toward her, took her hand in his, placed his other hand on her shoulder. Angus and I could have been on the moon. "Hadman..."

She was smiling without mirth. She stepped back. "Paul. Paul, come here."

I GOT BETWEEN them, feeling silly. Hadman was a big girl and she could take care of herself. Besides, she must have known what she was doing when she started this. But I said, "That's enough, Joaquin. You're getting too familiar, too soon."

I don't know what made me add those last two words, maybe it was just orneriness. But Hadman didn't like them. Her brows arched and for a

moment she looked like she was going to slap me.

Joaquin bowed slightly. He took a white handkerchief out and patted his forehead. The veneer returned. Only once after that did I see it fall away again, and then it was too late for Joaquin.

"I will dance," Hadman said.

Joaquin was all business again. "A dancer, eh? I should have known. Where did you study?"

"If I told you, it wouldn't mean anything. You've never heard of the place, Enrico. Do I get the job?"

"I'd like to see how you dance first, naturally."

Hadman's answer surprised me as much as it did Joaquin. "No," she said.

Joaquin frowned. "Did you say no?"

"That's what I said. It's tiring, Enrico, the way I dance. Twice an evening I will dance for your guests, but that's all. No rehearsals—ever. Now, do I get the job?"

"Yes," Joaquin nodded. "I think you will dance very well indeed. You go on tonight, at nine and at eleven-thirty."

He sat down and poured drinks for all of us. I think his reply came as a shock to him.

THAT NIGHT, Twin Oaks was crowded. It was a hot August evening, and Merryville's richer set came for the air-conditioning and the cooling drinks. They got much more than they bargained for.

I don't think Joaquin ever knew what my relationship with Hadman was, nor Angus'. He didn't fraternize with us often, but now he was proud of what he had done, and he stood with us at the bar, chatting.

"You'll have to see her gown to believe it," he told us. "I had it flown in from Chicago. Beautiful. I predict that Hadman will be a hit in it."

Angus smiled. "She will," he said. "I know."

I told him, "She'd better be. Joaquin has a big crowd on hand."

Joaquin looked just a little nervous.

At nine, the lights went out and a single white spotlight caught the dance floor. Joaquin strode into it, looking very trim and confident. "I'm proud to present something new to Twin Oaks," he said. "From the mysterious East, the exotic Hadman."

That was all and a fanfare followed his little speech.

"What will your band play?" Angus hissed to Joaquin.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Hadman said she'd speak to them."

As it turned out, the band played nothing. There was only silence. A mutter here and there in the crowd, a cough, a shuffling of feet. And that was all.

Hadman floated into the spotlight.

She didn't wear any exotic Eastern gown. She wore her bolero skirt and summery blouse. Her wine-red hair flowed free to her shoulders, and framed by it her face was very white.

I couldn't see Joaquin's face clearly in the darkness except for his gleaming white teeth. He mumbled under his breath, "Where the devil is the gown? Five hundred dollars..."

Hadman didn't need it.

She danced.

For the lovers of all that is artistic and graceful in dancing, she was Salome and Pavlova wrapped into one, and the liquid grace of her motions was all the more wonderful because there was no music to distract.

For every man in the audience she was everything he ever wanted. For some a hot-blooded savage whose body could coil and uncoil impossibly, curling around their hearts and squeezing with the passion of every primitive mating dance there ever was, and then letting go with a suddenness



Hadman

that left them gasping. For others a lover both cruel and tender, who one moment would crouch demurely, a suppliant, and the next would pirouette cruelly away, demanding more than they would give. For others a wife, fetching pipe and slippers with her motions, giving in a few brief moments more than any man could expect from his wife.

She was mother and sister too, for the women, and then all the passion was gone from her dance. She was tranquil and kind and everyone loved her.

At the last moment, Satan's mate returned, luring and mocking the men, weaving in and out among the tables, offering them everything and giving them nothing.

And then she was gone. She simply stepped out of the spotlight and disappeared.

Twin Oaks shook with applause, with roaring, with stamping of feet. In that brief five minutes Hadman had been everything to everyone, and it was another ten minutes before the

crowd settled back. They did not even cry for an encore; anything else would have been superfluous.

Joaquin spoke into a microphone after the lights went on. "The drinks are on the house," he declared, "in honor of Hadman!"

I lit a cigarette with trembling fingers, and Joaquin was at my side. "God," he said softly, so softly that he might have been speaking to himself. "What is she?"

It was a good question.

CHAPTER II

MERRYVILLE GOES CRAZY

IN THE early hours of the next morning, we found out that Hadman was as good a gambler as she was a dancer. Joaquin had a nightly poker game in his office, strictly by invitation and it could have been a tear-sheet from Merryville's society page.

The big cigar-smoking man with the very red cheeks was Merryville's mayor, Quinn Berkeley. He didn't pay too much attention to his cards; he was too busy looking at Hadman. To his left sat Joaquin, and beyond him was Sam Springer, a small, dissipated fellow who owned the city's one big hotel, the Merryville.

Springer's partner in the hotel business was a sour man of middle-age who looked like he was perpetually sucking on a lemon, name of Purness, I think. There were two other men whose names I forget. But both of them, as I remember it, were in the real-estate business.

The seventh player was Hadman.

Of the other half dozen, only Springer and Purness came late, too late to have seen Hadman dance either at nine or at eleven-thirty.

Angus and I had an easy night of it, lolling about the room, watching the poker game, helping ourselves to Joaquin's good stock of liquor. But a couple of Joaquin's flunkies came in

and out too, and I don't believe they liked us one bit.

Mayor Quinn Berkeley apologized every time he stayed in a pot with Hadman. He apologized even more when he raised her—but he really didn't have to. Hadman didn't lose a single hand in which she remained for the final card. That became pretty clear as the game moved along. The room filled with smoke in spite of the air-conditioning, voices grew louder as more liquor was consumed. But by the time two hours had passed, only Springer and Purness stuck it out if Hadman was around for the final card.

AND HADMAN was doing just fine. They played two dollars and five, and that could add up to a lot of money when you win better than one pot out of three in a seven-man game. Springer and Purness were the heavy losers, and once Purness said in his sour voice: "I don't understand how she does it. I'd almost say—"

"Beginner's luck," Mayor Berkeley's voice boomed. "Wait till Miss Hadman's been in our poker club for a while. She'll calm down. They all do, I always say."

"Well," Purness continued doggedly, "I'd swear that something—"

"I'll bet one thing," Berkeley said, putting down his cigar and laughing. "Miss Hadman's the prettiest addition to our poker club we've ever had. Yessir, the prettiest!"

"That isn't hard to believe," Springer said drily, "since she's the only woman."

Hadman stretched languidly. "What were you going to say you'd swear, Mr. Purness?"

Everyone looked at sour-faced Purness, and Purness got nervous. Damn Hadman, she was goading him on!

"Let's forget about it, eh?"

"Why?" Joaquin demanded. "The lady's calling your bluff, Purness. Are you going to answer?"

Purness shook his head. "Let's play poker, huh?"

But the next hand did it. Berkeley folded after the first three cards had been dealt in seven-card stud. Joaquin tossed in a couple of blue chips, Springer rode along. But Purness made it five, scowling when Hadman and Joaquin were the only callers.

Angus whispered to me, "I think he's got trips. Sure has a cruddy poker-face, Paul."

I grunted something, then watched Joaquin dealing the next card. Purness got a pair of ladies up, and he pushed five chips forward, smugly.

"Don't tell me he's got four of a kind," I grinned at Angus.

Hadman, with a two and a five up, raised him.

Joaquin turned his cards over, grumbling something about being caught in the middle.

Purness upped it again, and Hadman merely called. The final two cards showed nothing in either hand, and Hadman merely called Purness' bet. A moment later, he smiled when they were dealt the seventh card down. But his face still looked sour.

"Want to take the limit off this one?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Hadman answered with a question of her own.

"Forget this penny-ante stuff—bet what we want. Just this once?"

"All right."

Purness forgot about his chips, reached into his billfold and took out a stack of money. He counted it out, in twenties, shoved it toward the center of the table. "Five hundred dollars," he said. "You either call or get out, Miss Hadman."

SHE SMILED sweetly. "I'll do neither. I'll raise you five hundred

and make it a thousand. That is, if Joker will advance me the money."

Joaquin's face crimsoned slightly, but he gave her the money. Everyone was very still when Purness raised again, to fifteen hundred. Joaquin sighed and handed her the money when Hadman just called.

Purness turned his closed cards face up slowly. "Count 'em," he said. "Four. Four ladies." He began to reach for the money.

"Very pretty," said Hadman. She laid out a baby straight flush, one-two-three-four-five of hearts. "But not pretty enough, is it?"

Purness just sat there, the muscles of his jaw working. Finally, he said: "I think you cheated, Miss. I don't know how, but I think you did. It's not the money, it's the principle of the thing. I demand—"

Hadman's face got very white. She pointed a finger at Purness, held it there unwavering, inches from his nose. But she turned her face to me.

"Kill him, Paul."

"W-what?" I stammered.

Everyone began to laugh, and Mayor Quinn Berkeley said: "Congratulations, Miss Hadman. You sure have a way to break the tension over a hot poker game. Kill him, hah-hah. That's good! Kill him..."

Hadman stood up. She seemed confused. "Never mind, Paul. Forget that order. I'm...mixed up. I didn't realize..." She pushed all her money and chips to the center of the table. "Here," she said. "You can all take what you lost. I've had an unfair advantage."

"Hah-hah, that's good too," laughed Mayor Berkeley.

"I'm serious. Go ahead, take it. I was just having a little fun."

"No. You won it fairly," Joaquin told her. "I think the men here would know if any cheating had been done

I'd be the first to spot it."

"Think so?" Hadman smiled. "Here, take the deck. Now, mix it. Yes, that's right. Place it face down on the table. All right, turn over the first card. It's the seven of diamonds."

It was.

"The next one is the king of... clubs."

Right on the nose.

"Three of spades."

Hadman went through the deck, and didn't miss once.

NO ONE SAID anything when she finished. They all left the room, saying goodnight to Joaquin, nodding to Hadman. They all looked badly frightened. Even a college sophomore at an all-night poker session would have been able to tell that those cards were not marked in any way.

Joaquin lit a cigarette, crushing it out after the first puff. "How did you do that, Hadman? This will surprise you, but I am a religious man. I have seen things which are miraculous and which I could attribute to God, perhaps. But not this, this is not God's work. How..."

Joaquin was dead serious. Hot-tempered within, coated with an unruffled veneer on the outside, he yet had a religious core someplace in his makeup. Hadman had a way of dwarfing all around her, but still, this Joaquin could be an intensely interesting man. And now he was badly shaken, although he didn't show it.

Hadman shrugged. There were only the four of us in the room: Joaquin, Angus, myself, Hadman. "Incredible things will be happening soon in Merryville," she told us. "This is part of it, but just a small part, because while my knowledge and abilities may be God-like to you, they are puny and inconsequential by another standard."

"You speak in riddles," Joaquin said. "What about that trick with the

cards?"

"It wasn't a trick. Consider, Enrico: you can see colors, a dog can only see black and white; I can see as much more than you as you can see more than a dog. Your scientists call it extrasensory perception—this ability to see with a sixth sense which has no bodily organ. Good night."

And she walked from the room, as quickly as that. Joaquin stared after her, and we left him that way, Angus and I, as we followed Hadman out to the taxi stand and then back to our hotel.

Angus and I shared a room together, and soon I heard him snoring. I couldn't sleep. I listened to the radio for a time, heard a local news commentator have some fun with the announcement in the newspapers which told of an eviction notice and strange things in store for Merryville.

I didn't think it was funny at all. You'd have to see Hadman's dance to believe it, but it was something no human woman could duplicate. Then, there was her command to kill Purness. She hadn't been kidding, I could sense that. She had merely forgotten where she was and what laws govern this world of ours, and it was almost as if she had given me a fly-swatter and said to me, "Crush that pest, it annoys me."

Worst of all was the card trick. I didn't even try to figure that one out.

MARTIAL LAW came to Merryville on Monday.

The trouble started with a little five-year-old kid named Harold Peters. Harold, the *Merryville Gazette* related, liked to play near the attic window of his folks' home. Tragedy should have struck Merryville on Friday—and didn't.

Harold fell out of the window.

His mother saw him fall, the *Gazette* reporter wrote. So did his big

sister who, some insist, actually pushed him.

Harold tumbled from the window in broad daylight. His mother screamed and half a dozen passersby looked up in time to see Harold spinning gently in the air. He floated as serenely as a feather, and when a gust of wind whisked in from East Main Street, it lofted Harold skyward.

Apparently he liked his impossible ride. People heard him laughing as his body ascended, becoming a tiny dot against the blue sky.

Then Harold dropped down slowly, spinning end over end like a boy-shaped balloon. He alighted on his backside with a gentle bump and scurried off to play with his sister. His mother relates that he wanted to try the stunt all over again, but she locked the window.

I don't know why, but I associated the whole story with Hadman. I knocked on her hotel-room door and barged in, the newspaper clutched in my hand. Hadman pulled a dressing gown around herself as I entered, and I got a quick flash of long, beautiful thighs. Hadman's just a woman to me, if a gorgeous one, and so while I frankly admired what I had seen, Angus, I think, would have been half-delirious with this vision of a goddess emerging from her bath. That would cause a lot of grief, later.

"Good afternoon," Hadman greeted me. "I didn't send for you, Paul."

"Sorry," I smiled, "but I'm not a puppet. Maybe I'll come running when you pull the strings, because you're paying me. Meanwhile, I have a mind of my own."

She shrugged prettily. "Well, I guess it's a good thing you have some initiative, at that. Now, what's on this mind of yours?"

"Plenty." I handed her the newspaper, pointing to the article about Harold and his exploits. "What do you

know about that?"

She read in silence, then looked up. "What makes you think I should know anything about it?"

Her attitude struck me as being more important than her meaningless evasion. She didn't seem surprised in the slightest. I said, "Answer the question."

"Well," she lit a cigarette, "I know that you have something here which you call a law of gravity. A body will fall downward at eight feet per second the first second, accelerating eight feet per second each additional second. Right?"

I said I thought so.

"It's a stupid law, like all of your so-called 'natural' laws. It's based purely on what you see, with mathematics dragged in by the shirt-tails to make it convincing. Because you observe that bodies fall that way a million times running, you assume it will happen the million-and-first time. Brother, as your song says, it ain't necessarily so!"

I MUST HAVE scowled, because Hadman said I looked silly. I guess my face isn't made for scowling. "Look," I told her, "you're still not answering the question. Do you know anything about this?"

"If you put it that way, no. But I can make a very good guess. Remember something about Merryville's selection as a typical city? What happens here will show that any resistance to the Overlords' commands would be futile. Well, things are starting to happen. And that's all I know, Paul.

"Now, will you get out of here and let me dress? I have to see Joaquin in an hour, and I'll want you and Angus to come with me."

She turned her back and began to strip off the robe, cocksure in her knowledge that I'd leave the room because she had dismissed me.

She could go just so far playing the goddess. I stood there whistling. Hadman flung herself around angrily, belting the robe again. Her face had taken on a tint or two from her wine-red hair.

"Get out!" she screamed.

Hadman was boss, yes, because she paid me. But not boss to that extent. "Say please," I told her.

I'll admit this about Hadman, not until the very end of the Merryville adventure did she lose her temper. She ran toward me now and I thought for a moment she'd rake those long gleaming nails over my cheeks.

Instead, she threw her arms around me and kissed me.

Hadman felt like she looked—warm, vibrant, alive. The kiss was magnificent, that's the only word I know that can do it justice.

She pushed herself away from me slowly. "Now will you go, Paul? There's a darling. And if you're good, I might do that with you again sometime."

I went. My knees felt weak and I garbled "see you" in a croaking voice. Hadman had a way of treating you like something less than human, this time like a faithful lap-dog. And it worked.

Round one for Hadman, and almost by a knockout.

"**WHAT** THE hell's the matter with you?" Angus demanded as we were eating lunch in the hotel coffee shop. "You sure look confused."

I asked him if he knew about the kid, Harold Peters. No, he hadn't heard, but newspapers certainly could exaggerate things. Besides, what did that have to do with Hadman?

Right or wrong, I decided to make a clean breast of it. Angus and I were in this thing together, and I related the incident with Hadman. "Quite a

kiss," I finished. "Wow!"

He looked hurt. "You shouldn't have kissed her, Paul."

"You didn't hear straight. I didn't kiss Hadman, she kissed me. She started it, but I sure as heck liked it."

"How can I say it, Paul? I mean, I think Hadman is above that kind of stuff, as far above it as you're above the binary fission of an amoeba."

Lord, he was smitten with the goddess Hadman! "You're missing a trick," I told him. "Look at it this way: Hadman wants that. She can lead you around by a nose-ring, Angus. No, let me finish. She couldn't do that with me today, so she tried the kiss. I'd be a liar if I said it failed."

"What about the rest of them here in Merryville? After the dance she had them eating out of her hand. And Joaquin, I think Joaquin both fears her and loves her. Also, she took care of all those big-wigs at the poker game. She called Purness' bluff, and he backed out. She returned all her winnings, and by the time they said goodnight, everyone from Merryville's mayor to its two important real-estate magnates was scared stiff."

"Hadman's taking over this town, Angus. Don't ask me why, but that's what she's doing."

"I don't—" Angus began, only he never got the rest of it out. Someone started screaming.

A sluggish molten river flowed into the restaurant from under the swinging doors which led to the kitchen. It hissed and smoked, cutting a channel for itself in the wooden floor. Bubbling and seething, it oozed forward like a flow of lava.

Out through the swinging doors, a cook came running, his big white hat falling into the burning stream. He skirted it ponderously with his huge bulk, shouting: "Cripes! I don't know. I quit. I'm finished. *Pfft!* I light my stove and it melts. Yeah, melts and

starts running off like a brook, burning everything in front of it—"

People ran from the coffee shop, waitresses, diners, everyone. I saw one shifty-eyed individual dig into the cash register with his hand and then disappear in the crowd.

With Angus, I was among the last to leave. I knelt for a moment near the stream which by now had burned a channel completely through the floor and begun to drip down in big congealing drops to the basement. The stuff looked like molten iron and it was cooling fast. Ridiculously, I wanted to reach out and touch it. But Angus pulled me away.

THE FIRE department arrived simultaneously with the police, and the chief conferred with Purness, who wrung his hands together sadly. His scrawny partner, Sam Springer, assured the crowd that they had nothing to fear. The police confirmed this, because the stuff had burned itself out and had hardened into a dull, irregular mess of iron in the basement.

The fire department went home, but the police remained to ask questions. One of them approached me.

"People say you were about the last to leave, Mr...."

"Reardon. Paul Reardon. Yes, that's true."

"What was that gunk like?"

"Well, I thought it looked like metal, molten metal."

Sam Springer came over and joined us. "That's fantastic. Do you know how much heat you'd need to melt iron? Plenty—a couple of thousand degrees, I think."

Hadman's statement concerning our natural laws crossed my mind. If gravity could go haywire because there wasn't any valid law to begin with, how about the law which said that iron must melt at such-and-such a temperature? I remembered a book I had

read once. Some philosopher had gone off the deep end a couple of hundred years ago, declaring that all our scientific laws were unwarranted intuitive jumps—assumptions which might not hold water at all. What was his name, Home or Hume or something like that?

Two lab technicians from the police department settled it. They arrived a few minutes later, went down to the basement and examined the stuff. They didn't look so good when they came out.

"It's iron," one of them said.

"Yeah." This was his companion. "Iron all right. It turned molten, flowed into the coffee shop because the floor slopes one-point-five degrees. Mr. Springer, was there a stove along the left hand wall in the kitchen?"

Springer nodded. "Certainly. A big job with a dozen ranges. Why?"

"It's not there now. But what beats me is how anyone got it hot enough to melt without destroying the whole building. Besides, you'd need coke and hard coal and carbon and a lot of other things."

The cook scratched his bald head. "I turned on one range, that's all. The stove started to glow around the fire. Yeah, glow. Then it dripped and began to disappear, sort of like if you put a chunk of ice under hot water."

The police chief spread his hands out eloquently enough. "I give up," he admitted. "We'll have to tell Mayor Berkeley."

"Just like a chunk of ice under hot water," the cook said again when the reporters arrived.

THINGS GOT worse on Saturday.

Three more children defied the law of gravity. One little girl who was not old enough to walk rose out of her playpen and paraded around on the ceiling before her parents could get her down. The *Gazette* lost no time in

drawing a connection between gravity's failure to assert itself and stoves which melted away. "Strange things are happening in Merryville," Saturday's editorial began. I'd call that the journalistic understatement of a lifetime.

Is there a law which prevents stones from falling out of the sky? Not meteorites, but the common garden variety pelting down in brief showers, breaking windows and denting brand new cars? I guess there is, but the law concerning such things took a vacation eight times on Saturday.

Sunday's editorial declared that Merryville's twelve-man police force no longer could cope with the situation. Reports came in furiously. A man turned on his hose to water the lawn, and only water vapor came out. Tomatoes which the farmer assured police were normal the night before swelled the size of over-ripe pumpkins on Sunday. An eight-year-old youth who lived in Harold Peter's neighborhood grew a long curly beard overnight. Next door, a frail little woman who all the years of her marriage had been beaten by her husband, astounded people by single-handedly freeing a car which wallowed hub-cap deep in the mud after Saturday night's rain. She told reporters she felt stronger than Superman, and proved it by sending her husband off to the hospital with a black eye and three broken ribs.

You get the idea. Hadman smiled smugly with each new report, and if she knew anything, she wouldn't say. Late Sunday afternoon I cornered her in her hotel room, and I said: "If you don't want to let the police in on what's happening, okay. But you're going to tell me if I have to force it out of you. I'm not kidding, Hadman."

"Silly Paul, I know you're not. But I also know you won't do a thing about it."

I'd been drinking. Maybe I shouldn't have done it, but I felt a little giddy. I put my hands on her shoulders and shook her. "Talk, dammit!"

The door opened behind me and Angus strode into the room. "What's going on?"

HADMAN BROKE loose and sat on the sofa, sighing. "I just told Paul he was fired, and he took it hard."

"That's a lie!"

Hadman turned to Angus. "Would I lie?"

"N-no," he said. "Say, I hope I'm not fired too."

"Of course not. You can stay as long as you want. But up to now you've had it pretty easy, haven't you. You'll have to work a little harder today. I want you to throw Paul out of here."

Angus blanched. I told him, "Well, what are you waiting for? Go ahead, throw me out."

He was game. He dove for me, cursing. Maybe I had been fooling around half-heartedly that day in New York, I don't know. But now I met Angus' wild charge with a tattoo of rights and lefts to the head, and sobbing, he fell back and landed on the floor.

I whirled around. "Better get another boy who can play your game tougher. Better—"

Hadman smiled sweetly, and I didn't get the idea until it was too late. I heard a noise behind me, spun just in time to see Angus, his face bloody and twisted in rage, leaping at me. His hand flashed up grasping a big ornate vase by its neck, and I tried to lunge away.

Almost, I made it. But the vase crashed against my left temple and I staggered, half aware of the broken shards tumbling to the floor. I guess I

must have joined them, because the plush green rug came up to meet me, and then all the lights in Merryville exploded inside my skull.

I awoke with a headache. I explored the side of my head with my fingers and they came away damp. Groping about for the light switch and snapping it on, I stumbled into the bathroom, realizing that someone had brought me back to my own room. But Angus wasn't here.

I splashed cold water on my face and reached into the medicine cabinet. I couldn't have been out long, because the iodine burned as I dabbed it on.

Back in the bedroom I found a bottle of Scotch which Angus kept around, and I took a long pull from it. That made me feel a little better, but it didn't last. It was then that I saw the note.

Scrawled hurriedly, a woman's handwriting—Hadman's, I guessed.

Paul: I liked you. You could have been a good pet. You chose otherwise and I can't help that. You know too much, you tie too many things together, and I'm not yet ready for that. I still should like to see you live, Paul, because you really do amuse me. But this is a choice which you must make for yourself. I've given orders for you to be killed in Merryville, and you'd be surprised if you knew how many people work for me now. You can either get out of Merryville or die, Paul.

It was signed with the letter H.

HADMAN wouldn't joke. She meant it. My number was up in Merryville, and I didn't doubt in the slightest that she had enough cronies in town to get me ready for a long

pine box. I frowned at myself in the mirror when I went to wash my face again. I said aloud, "Don't be a chump, Paul Reardon. You're no hero. Why don't you clear out of this burg?"

I shook my head to clear it. She had me talking to myself already. If I didn't watch out, I'd really go off my rocker.

I still felt all washed out. I showered, shaved, took a long nap, then dressed. It was getting late.

Downstairs at the snack-bar I had a couple of hamburgers and a bottle of beer. Smiling, I charged it to Hadman. By the time I finished eating, the clock over the cash register said one A.M. and I decided to get the hell out of Merryville.

That was one o'clock, Monday morning. At one-thirty, the militia came to Merryville at the urgent request of its mayor, Quinn Berkeley, rolling into town in regimental force, stringing barbed wire and posting sentries almost in less time than it takes to tell.

I guess I was too busy with my own thoughts to find anything strange about the number of soldiers on Main Street. Maybe if I'd looked carefully I'd have seen rifles and fixed bayonets, I don't know. Anyway, I planned to hit it out of town on the main road up north, walking until I could find a place to sleep, then trying my luck at hitch-hiking in the morning.

It didn't work out that way at all. Where Main street turns into Route 30, uniformed men dug big holes into the ground and hammered fence-posts into them. Coils of wire were stacked in neat piles.

A corporal stopped me, and this time I saw the fixed bayonet. "Where have you been, friend?" he demanded. "Sleeping."

"Well, you missed the radio announcement. Mayor cried to the gover-

CHAPTER III

DIUNIUN

nor, the governor sent in the national guard. Merryville is under martial law—and no one can come in or leave the city until this mess is cleared up. That's what the loogie says, anyway. Say, maybe you can tell me what's going on? We G.I.'s heard rumors, but hell, you know the army. . . ."

I tried two other roads with the same results. I cut across a field and ran into soldiers stringing wire. I told a taxi driver I'd give him fifty bucks to deposit me outside the city limits—not that I had fifty bucks. But he said we'd never get beyond the outskirts.

BY THREE-FORTY-FIVE I gave it up as a bad job and trudged wearily back to the hotel. The night clerk called after me as I stepped into the elevator, "Mr. McDougle changed to a single room, sir. Will you want one too?"

His words didn't register until I reached our floor, the seventh. When they did, I got careful. I edged up to the door and tried the knob. Not locked. If Angus changed his room, there must be reason. . . .

Flat against the wall, I twisted the knob and pushed the door in. A loud report shattered the silence, and something splattered against the far wall of the corridor, digging a hole before it spent itself.

I took a quick look inside the room. On a chair facing the door, a smoking revolver was tied securely, a piece of string extending from the trigger to the inside of the doorknob. The muzzle pointed an unblinking eye right at the center of the doorway, where I should have been when I entered. . . .

People came out into the hall sleepily, rubbing their eyes, sniffing gun powder and talking loudly about the explosion.

I ran to a fire exit and plunged downstairs, quick.

ALL NIGHT I walked the streets of Merryville aimlessly. A couple of times I found myself dodging from shadows and my heart did a mad dance into my chest. It was a hell of a fix. I couldn't go to the police because they had nothing more to say about things in Merryville now that the army had come. But people would be gunning for me all over the city, unknown, unexpected people.

And I couldn't leave. It was almost funny. I tried a sleepy-eyed Pfc who got me through the echelon as far as a captain. He listened politely to my story, then went into a tirade about cranks and crazy happenings and would I please go home to sleep.

I crossed Main Street and mingled with a little knot of citizens who had decided to spend the night outdoors in the interest of science. As one old codger put it, "If anything takes place like what happened the last few days, I want to be awake to see it. You think maybe it's the Russians, young feller? Folks say maybe they have some new secret weapons because we have more atom bombs. I dunno—maybe they're trying 'em out in Merryville."

Five minutes after I left the crowd, I realized someone was following me. Just a shadow among shadows, but it flitted in and out among the patches of light shed by the lamp posts.

When I stopped it halted too, half a block away. I began sweating. A soldier marched by, fixed bayonet gleaming under a street light. He nodded curtly and told me to get indoors.

My palms were clammy and I started to run. The shadow ran with me, two or three dozen paces behind. I turned a corner gasping for breath, ran into a slouched figure, hat-brim

drawn low over his face.

"Reardon!" he cried hoarsely, groping quickly at his belt. His hand came away with a knife.

The shadow turned the corner and joined us. Another man whose face in the half-darkness looked familiar. I thought it was one of Joaquin's flunkies.

I backed away from them warily, but the one with the knife commenced circling around behind me. I said, "Did Joaquin send you to kill me?"

"Ain't that cute? He wants to know if Joaquin sent us. Hey, Phil, did Joaquin send us?"

Phil was the man with the knife. He snarled, "Joaquin should only know. He'd have us flayed! Now, Reardon, don't make it hard, 'cause we got you—"

I stood, suddenly, with my back to a lamp post. Phil sauntered toward me, almost casually, running the fingers of his left hand over the knife. Then he lunged.

I DARTED around behind the lamp post, saw the blade flash in at me, then heard it clang metallically. The blade snapped off.

"Damn!" Phil swore.

His companion snickered. "You're careless. But don't worry, I got a shiv."

Phil half turned around when the other man spoke, and I used the side of my hand, judo-fashion, against the base of his jaw. He moaned and stumbled to his knees, and when the second man leaned toward me over his prone form, knife in hand, I kicked Phil in the face. He screamed out a mouthful of teeth and tumbled back against his companion.

I dove flat on my belly when the second man hurled his knife. It didn't miss my head by half a foot, hurtling by with an almost malicious sound.

Then I whirled and darted around

the corner again. Only one man followed me; Phil had had enough for one night.

Ahead I heard a car engine idling. Sobbing in great lungfuls of air, I stood in front of Merryville's post-office. A mail truck idled near the curb and I could see a uniformed figure bending over one of those all-night outdoor boxes. I climbed into the truck, released the handbrake, clutched into first-gear. The postal employee yelled once and then lumbered after me, a big man holding a stack of letters against his chest.

I zoomed away down the street, watched the postman shaking his fist at me through the rear-view mirror. I stuck my head out the window and cried, "Sorry!"

It was a mistake. Phil's friend had come up, and a shot shattered the fly-window a few inches from my nose. Now that his knife was gone, Joaquin's flunky had no choice but to use his gun, despite the fact that all the soldiers in Merryville might come running.

I left them both back there, and I think the pistol shot frightened the postal employee more than the theft of his truck. Still, I didn't have more than a few minutes of grace because this was a federal offense and all the soldiers in Merryville might be on my tail in short order.

All the way to the barrier at the end of Main Street, over and over again, one thought twisted through my brain. *They tried to kill me. They tried to kill me. Those cheap, no-good punks. Because a dame said so, they tried to kill me....*

IT'S FUNNY how your ideas can change. All night I had wanted only one thing: to get out of Merryville. Now I thought I could do it. Dawn threatened to come up any minute, but there still was plenty of dark-

ness left. So I could ride right up to the barrier. I didn't think the soldiers would stop a postal truck.

But I was sore. I remember getting this way once before, when a buddy of mine had been killed on Iwo, but that's a long time ago. Now it was me, people wanted to kill me—and hell, I couldn't just stick my tail between my legs and run away, yelping, like a frightened puppy.

Twice they came at me with knives; they wanted to play mumbledy-peg with my rib-case. Twice they shot at me, with a booby trap and in person. I didn't think I'd be able to shave again if I ran away. I couldn't look at myself in the mirror....

They let me through the barrier, hardly asking a question. Only I didn't head up north to safety. Instead, I took the first cut-off—which led to Twin Oaks and Joaquin.

I pulled the truck up on the shoulder a good two miles from Twin Oaks and left it there. I chuckled. One more mystery for the militia to solve. Yes, strange things were happening in Merryville...

Birds twittered in their nests when I reached the roadhouse. The sun came up behind me, big and pink and beautiful. Almost I couldn't quite believe all the crazy things that had taken hold of Merryville.

The door wasn't locked, and deserted Joaquin's dance floor looked as big as a gymnasium. I crossed it to the bar, realized my hands were trembling when I helped myself to some whiskey—

Someone cleared his throat behind me and I whirled—Joaquin! He stood there in a silken robe, smoking a cigarette.

"I'm an insomniac," he said. "I didn't know you were one, too, Mr. Reardon. It is Reardon, isn't it? One of Hadman's... friends?"

"Ex-friends," I told him. "Joaquin, have you got about an hour?"

"We don't open for business until three this afternoon, so I have all the time in the world." He looked very tired.

"You couldn't sleep because of Hadman. Right?"

Smiling, he shrugged. "What do you want to tell me? If it's ex-friend and not friend, then maybe also it's ex-employee. If you're looking for a job here, the answer is no. We're all filled."

"That's not it," I said. I took down the bottle of Canadian, poured us each a stiff drink, and started to talk. I told him everything, and I knew I was taking a chance. But I couldn't go this thing alone, and I was willing to gamble on Joaquin. I didn't draw any connections between Hadman and the crazy eviction notice, nor between the notice and what had happened in Merryville. But I left the road wide open for Joaquin to draw his own connections, and he didn't strike me as a dodo.

WHEN I finished he lit another cigarette and frowned. "You're sure it was my men who tried to kill you?"

"Reasonably sure. It was dark, but I got a couple of close looks."

"So it goes," he sighed. "Reardon, let me tell you something. As near as a man can come to owning a town, I owned this little city of Merryville, until a few days ago. I control all the gambling, and there's a lot of it. The mayor is my friend, my very good friend. So is the bank president. So is the chief of police. Anyway, I owned the town. But I don't anymore."

"You're telling me!"

"Hadman does. In a few short days, she's undone what it took me a lifetime to do. I should hate her, eh Rear-

don? I should hate her guts; as the expression goes...."

I merely sat there, not saying anything.

"Well, I don't. I think I'm afraid of her, Reardon. No, don't be surprised. I'm not in the habit of babbling my life history to everyone I meet, but I had to talk to someone. And you're it. I fear her, Reardon. And—I love her!"

I took another drink. "Let's drop Hadman for a while. What about the rest of this stuff? What about the things which have been happening in Merryville?"

"What can I say, Reardon? I am a God-fearing man, despite everything else. If it is God's will—"

"Would you be willing to tie it in with the eviction notice?"

"Why not? It makes sense. Still, if it is God's will—"

"All right, let's forget that too, temporarily. Would you be willing to let me live here until this mess clears up? I don't know what I'll do, but I'll do something, Joaquin. Someone's got to, because I have a hunch this is a lot more important than just Merryville."

"How could you stay here? My men—"

"I didn't think you'd keep them after what they did."

"As a matter of fact, I won't. But consider, Reardon: if I say yes, I will let you remain here for as long as you want, both because I like you and I like what you are trying to do. And then Hadman comes along, lets me make love to her perhaps, and tells me to have you destroyed. What can I do? I want to be fair to you, Reardon. And Hadman's power over me I cannot at this time fight. I pray every night that I can be strong enough; but God doesn't hear me because I've been wicked all my life. So, what can I tell you?"

I got up. "Then it's no?"

"Reardon, Reardon—don't be bitter! *Madre de Dios*, I play the game fair with you! For your own good I will not permit you to stay here. A few hours, yes—but that's all. Bathe, rest, sleep if you want, have a meal—but by two o'clock this afternoon I want you out of here."

"All right," I said. "Okay. You know, when I came in here I thought I'd ram your teeth right down your throat if you refused. But now that you have, I can see your point. I think you're a square guy, Joaquin. And I'll take you up on that until two o'clock. Mostly I need some sleep."

"Fine. And perhaps—who knows?—someday we will be able to chat about this and laugh over a good bottle of Cognac. Not the French type, Reardon, because the French are barbarians. But real Spanish Cognac. Someday, eh?"

TWO O'CLOCK came too soon. I slept most of the morning, got up to shave and shower at noon. Joaquin had a meal waiting—and what a meal! Oysters, roast duck, wild rice, a big slab of pie—and a lot of good white wine. When I finished, I felt better than I had in days.

Joaquin pumped my hand vigorously out in the big main room which was being prepared for the evening's festivities. "This is goodbye for now, Reardon—and good luck. *Vaya con Dios*."

I'd walk all the way back to Merryville, a good three or four miles—and then, well, then I'd see.

But I didn't get half a mile. A big flashy convertible, top-down, roared up from the direction of town, and I got a quick glimpse of Hadman's wine-red hair as the car pulled to a stop a few dozen yards down the road.

"Paul!" she called. "Paul. Poor Paul. I really thought you had left

Merryville after Joaquin's men failed last night." She sighed as she approached, the picture of innocence now, summer wind blowing her hair loosely, whipping her white skirt around her trim calves.

"I'm still here," I told her.

"And I take it you've been visiting with Joaquin. Well, no matter."

She opened her purse, reached in—and then she was pointing a little snub-nosed automatic in the general direction of my navel.

"It's a shame, Paul. If they couldn't do the job, I'll have to do it myself. You're going to die, you know. Right now. You have to."

She wasn't speaking to hear herself talk. Not Hadman. And I felt nearer to death at that moment than when Joaquin's two flunkies chased me.

"Why?" I asked. I wanted to stall for time. Anything.

"Why? That's a stupid question. You disobeyed me. Even if you didn't know what you know—which is very little—you'd have to die. You disobeyed me. You also tried to command me. You should have known you couldn't do that, Paul."

The damndest part of it was that she still looked innocent. A car flashed by and she came close to me, linking her arm in mine, prodding my waist with the automatic and hiding it with her purse. She stepped away when the car disappeared around a bend.

"I'm sorry, Paul."

Her finger fascinated me. I saw it grow taut, beginning to tighten on the trigger. Hadman wouldn't pull it, I was sure of that. She'd squeeze the trigger like an expert, and she wouldn't miss. I'd be very dead.

DID YOU ever see a cloud come up suddenly out of a clear blue sky? One came now, swooping down like a vulture after carrion. Quick, just like

that—and I'd seen enough crazy things in Merryville to accept this pretty much in stride. Hell, it saved my life.

One moment I stood there, facing Hadman and death on a dusty Midwestern road; the next—this cloud swooped low and enveloped me. Only then it wasn't a cloud any longer but a globe made of something like glass, only softer.

I stood inside it!

Hadman stared at me. She scowled. She stamped her foot. She looked very frustrated. I saw her lips moving but I couldn't hear what she said. I couldn't hear a thing.

The globe lifted. If I closed my eyes I couldn't tell, because I felt nothing. But the ground zoomed away under me with impossible speed. Hadman became a dot. The convertible became a dot. Then Joaquin's roadhouse swam into view—not much more than a dot itself.

Merryville was a little jewel in the bright sunshine, and then Merryville passed through the little dot stage before it too disappeared.

Patches of green and brown and sparkling blue started out big, then grew smaller, then disappeared. Vast formations of clouds were little puffs of cotton.

Then dots.

Everything began to look like a map and I got scared. *Those big blue splotches over there, count them. Five. The Great Lakes!*

I shuddered and huddled down in the bottom of my little globe. When I looked again the black cloud had returned and I couldn't see a thing. It was better that way.

When the cloud lifted, I found myself in a room with highly polished metal walls which curved in on one another overhead to form the ceiling. A window, ellipsoid in shape, broke the smooth surface to my left and I

crossed the floor to it.

Far away, what looked like the rim of an inverted saucer glowed in the black sky. I blinked and then peered again. It was still there. I have seen fanciful pictures of what the Earth might look like from half a hundred thousand miles out in the depths of space.

This was no picture!

I gazed out on the crescent Earth, unthinkably far away.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

The voice startled me. If each word somehow were plucked from a harp string, it might sound like that. I whirled to face the room with its curving metal walls.

A LITTLE man stood in the center of the floor, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. A man? Not really, because he wasn't three feet tall, including the pointed pink cap perched jauntily atop his head. His skin glowed a delicate purple, his eyes flashed the fires of a color alien to the rainbow. He smiled at me and his tongue darted over tiny pointed teeth.

"Yes," the mellow voice repeated, "it's beautiful. The most beautiful world in the Galaxy, and the Galaxy has more worlds than you have people on Earth. It's so beautiful that you can't blame us for wanting it back, can you?"

I said I didn't know what he was talking about.

He frowned petulantly. "I can't understand that. We placed the eviction notice in all your newspapers, yet you don't know what I mean. You Earthmen actually lie to each other at times, eh?"

I nodded, lighting a cigarette. The smoke surprised him, and he backed away a little, with short mincing steps. The words of the ridiculous announce-



Diuniun

ment suddenly came back to me, and I said, "Don't tell me you're the... Overlord of Sector 13? You're not Diuniun?"

"No other," he assured me. "I know, you thought a super being would have super size. As you can see, that's not true, but we have powers, Reardon. Oh yes! For example, I speak your language by scanning it directly in the memory banks of your brain and selecting the correct words for my thoughts. In the same way I taught English to Hadman. Ah, Hadman—and therein lies the difficulty!"

"You're damn right," I said, "she wanted to shoot me." But I hardly heard my own words. A delicate little purple man—the Overlord. Could that somehow explain the universal legends of fairyfolk, of elves, gnomes, goblins—of all the little creatures in Earth's folklore?

Diuniun smiled again. "Stop interrupting and let me talk. I had a reason for saving your life, Reardon. Ages ago, my people ruled the Earth. Stern duty carried my ancestors of that lost

age away across the Galaxy. What it was doesn't matter, but the important thing is this: *we all had to go.*

"But we made provisions. We mutated one of the species of higher primates, and the result is man. Some of you we left here to keep the Earth ready for our return, others we took as servants. Hadman is such a one. Now our task at the other end of the Galaxy is concluded, and with our servants we have returned."

A SIMPLE story, just like that. And the elves were the creators of mankind—in fact, not the other way around in fancy....

If you saw Diuniun, you couldn't doubt his words. Small, elf-like, naive of face and puny of body, he yet carried with him an aura of power. Diuniun was the Overlord and all he said was truth; I knew that even as I listened.

He went on: "Now, we are back. Some among us feel it would be unfair to take your planet from you, since you've had thousands of years to build it up as your home. Others disagree. We decided to let what we found determine the outcome. If you had done a good job here on Earth, we'd let you stay, finding for ourselves a second best world in the Galaxy. We are a fair people, Paul Reardon, and too old a race to be vindictive in any way. But if you had done a poor job on Earth—"

"Well?" I demanded breathlessly. Mellow harp tones, his next words might hold the fate of mankind....

"Earth is ugly! The small, petty ugliness does not matter, because even a man like your friend Joaquin has a lot of good in him. I refer to the big things. The Reds, Communists—what do you call them?—march with horror and destruction all over the world. I don't have to tell you that, because you

know it better than I do. Think of your European cities of Vienna and Budapest, Paul Reardon. Do you see gay, happy waltzes, women dancing in the streets, men singing raucously but happily in beer gardens? You do not. In one city you see the threat of your Red dictators; in the other you already see the marching feet of the Communist militia. Is that not ugly?"

I told him about another would-be world conqueror named Adolph Hitler, and what the world had done to him. Brought together in their common wrath for the enemy, the people of the free world outside the Iron Curtain would not be denied, this also I told Diuniun. But I don't think I was convincing. I can feel pretty strongly about that, but I'm not a rah-rah boy. Maybe that's the trouble with too many of us.

"Listen," said Diuniun. "Don't misunderstand. I'm on your side. I have argued with my peers against taking your world, because while with our superior science we could forge a home for ourselves, elsewhere, although it would be difficult, you'd be completely unable to do any such thing. We'd deliver you elsewhere, to a world of your choice, and I suspect you'd all perish there in time. We wouldn't be able to lift a finger to help; that's one of the laws of my people. We don't interfere."

"STILL, EARTH is ugly. As Overlord of Sector 13—this sector of space, Paul Reardon—I must make the final decision. And I will do it fairly. It's hard for you to understand that, but fairness is an integral part of our makeup. We can act in no other way."

"The difficulties in Merryville were Hadman's idea. If we decide to evacuate your people and come home to Earth ourselves, Hadman will be the

administrative officer in charge of evacuation of your cities and countries. Hence, one place—Merryville—encounters a sample of our science which has come far enough along the evolutionary ladder to scoff at what you call natural laws. Hadman feels that will demonstrate the futility of any resistance but Hadman, I think, enjoys it. She hates the other half of humanity, Paul Reardon, as do most of her people. They are jealous of their brothers living in a Garden of Eden, jealous of you.

"But I'm getting off the track. I want to be fair with you of Earth, Paul Reardon. I can be nothing but fair. But what my peers do not know because every man's character is his own private business is this: I am capricious, petulant; I like to act on a whim. And now I have such a whim, which is why I brought you here. I have watched you. I like you. You get ornery when someone tries to push you around, which is why Hadman almost destroyed you. Very well. My peers, the Overlords, look at humanity's history and say humanity is ugly because of Judas and Alexander, Timur Lenk and Genghis Kahn, Napoleon and Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin—"

A buzzing sound interrupted Diuniun, and he frowned. "What's this?" he muttered, more to himself than to me. "A scout ship back?" He walked to a wall and flicked a series of switches. There was a faint humming and a whole section of the wall fell away, revealing a long tunnel. I still didn't know where we were, but I had the impression of some monstrous ship that could travel the void of space like the Queen Elizabeth could ply the waters of the Atlantic.

"Through the tunnel Hadman came striding!

"I came in my jet as soon as I could," she told Diuniun angrily.

"What do you mean by rescuing this man? I wanted him dead!"

"Temper," Diuniun advised her. "Sometimes, Hadman, you forget who is servant and who is Overlord."

Hadman—tall, lithe woman with strength in every line of her proud body; and Diuniun—tiny elf of a purple man with a quiet smile on his lips. Which was the servant, which the master?

"**H**IS MINE," Hadman persisted. "Let me take him back to kill him on the Earth that sired him. Remember, you gave me a free hand in Merryville—with all the science that I wanted."

She laughed, the wine-red hair tumbling about her shoulders. "Come here and look at this." She led us to a section of the wall which at her touch became a glowing amber screen.

"Something like your television," Diuniun explained to me. "Only, by comparison, that's crude stuff."

A room swam into view, full color and three-dimensional. Yes, our television was crude by comparison.

"...gravity, laws of nature, all that is fun," Hadman was saying. "But I've come up with something special this time, thanks to Diuniun's science. Mutation. Would you believe that thing once was a common, one-celled amoeba?"

The room in the screen was a laboratory which Hadman identified as the biological lab of Merryville Teacher's College. I saw a man, a white-smocked laboratory technician, staring in horror at something that couldn't be seen yet, since the edge of the screen cut us off from it.

The technician turned and ran, but whatever it was had trapped him. He stood with his back to a great bank of machinery. He flung his hands over his head, all control gone, and his mouth

hung open. He must have been screaming.

The thing came into view!

Large, much larger than the man—an amorphous mass of blueberry jelly which even now threw out several pseudopods as it rolled forward. A giant amoeba, grown impossibly huge by science unknown to mankind. But that wasn't the worst of it. The thing had eyes!

A score of them, perhaps. Large, unblinking, they seemed to scrutinize the man. Then the pseudopods flashed out quickly, caught his ankles. Soon the man was immersed up to his knees, screaming, soundlessly.

The thing climbed, engulfing the man to his waist. Climbed. . . . His legs became hazy, indistinct. Even as he stood there, screaming, he was being digested!

Hadman pressed a button, and the screen faded away. "They'll destroy it," she admitted. "But I have a whole bag of tricks up my sleeve, and by the time I'm finished they'll know who's boss."

I WANTED to call Hadman a fiend, to call her everything wicked and vile in the English language. But she wouldn't understand. She'd probably smile and talk about different standards. One half of the Overlords' experiment with their mutated primates could be chalked up as a failure: if Hadman were representative, the human servants of the Overlords were a cruel, self-centered, spoiled, Satanic people.

Diuniun waxed angry. "Play your game," he told Hadman. "Go ahead, play it! I still have faith in humanity, in the real humanity we left here on Earth an age ago."

"And the other Overlords chose you to decide the fate of Earth!" Hadman sneered. "You're weak, Diuniun.

You're just decadent!"

He shrugged his tiny shoulders. "But fair, Hadman. And I was telling Reardon here that I have a whim—"

"You and your whims! I remember that time on Korlay—"

"Shut up," Diuniun said quietly. "Hadman, I will tolerate you because my peers wish it, but don't tax my patience. If I send you back across the Galaxy, and if we do take Earth, I can order you to remain on one of the worlds of the Fringe?"

Hadman became pale and she shut up. I knew then. Diuniun, tiny purple Diuniun, was the Overlord. Hadman could flaunt her arrogance, and at times she might get away with it, but Diuniun was master.

"This I have decided," he said. "Earth will have a fair chance. For obvious reasons, we can't let the whole planet know what is going on, because we may yet simply go away. Thus, everything must be determined on a small scale. And Reardon is a good, typical Earthman. *Reardon, what would you do if I told you the fate of your people, the fate of all mankind, rested in your hands?*"

"I don't know what he'd do," Hadman scoffed. "But I'd laugh. I'd think that's swell, Diuniun—"

"I told you to shut up. I want you here because it's fair to permit both sides in on this. But Reardon, I mean that: the fate of humanity depends upon you. We will play a game to match Hadman's.

"Consider. The Overlords feel you've done a bad job not merely because of your Hitlers and Napoleons, but because the free people must always bicker among themselves at times of crisis. Because they never can act together the way intelligent beings should. All right. This is a time of crisis, you know that. Within the next few weeks, I must decide

whether you Earthmen are to have your planet or not.

"It's up to you. Do you know, the mythological character Hercules? He was given a series of labors to perform—ah, you're nodding. I see that you know of him. Good. You too will be given your series of labors. But with a difference.

"First, Hadman will try to stop you. If you win, we Overlords don't get Earth, and that means Hadman doesn't get it either. Second, you must have companions in this venture. Remember, you must show action in a concerted, intelligent fashion. When I send you back to Earth, you are to stop the first three people you encounter, Reardon. No choice, and I will be watching you—the first three, whoever they are. They are your assistants. You can tell them what you want, everything or nothing. But the labors will be such that you cannot perform them alone. Three assistants, let the Fates decide who they are to be, and together with them you will shape the destiny of mankind.

"You will have ten days, Reardon, and a trio of labors. If you succeed, Earth is yours. If you fail, we take the planet. If you win, humanity will never know, because your ten days will be ten extra days, wiped forever from the racial memory. How many days does your month of September have? Thirty? Very well, this year it will contain forty days—the first ten are extra, Reardon, and only you will remember. For the rest of humanity, those ten days will be as nothing.... Have you any questions, Reardon?"

I SAID NOTHING. Me, Paul Reardon. Just an ordinary guy who wanted to lead an ordinary life. Me, Paul Reardon—plucked out of the stream of life by a little purple creature who was something more than

man and something less than God. Plucked out to play a game like old Hercules. Only this time all mankind shaped up as the stakes. Hercules and me.... But I didn't feel much like Hercules just then....

"N-no questions," I managed.

"Hah!" Hadman snorted. "You win, Diuniun. I won't kill him. It will be more fun this way. See him? He's afraid—afraid. A lot of good he'll do for his people. Let him play your game. Let him. I'll watch, and I'll laugh. And we'll be landing on Earth before you know it."

"Perhaps," Diuniun told her. "But I still have faith in humanity, and in Reardon. Now I have things to do, so you can return in your scout ship, Hadman, and I'll send Reardon back to Merryville. Reardon?"

"Yes?" I felt giddy and I felt frightened, and Hadman was right. Why did Diuniun have to single me out? Anyone else, but why me?

"You will receive instructions for the first labor after you recruit your trio of aides. And now—goodbye and good luck!"

I stared dumbly. Hadman sauntered past, insolent, sure of herself. She whispered, "What a hero he's chosen! Paul, if I wanted to, I could make you forget the whole thing. I could make you love me, like Angus or Joaquin, and you'd come crawling on your knees to me, burning for my kisses. But I won't. Go ahead, play your game—but I'll see you dead before it succeeds. Remember, Diuniun said I could fight you at it."

She was gone, back through her tunnel and into her waiting scout ship.

Diuniun studied some charts. He hardly paid me any heed, but abruptly the black cloud seemed to grow in one corner of the room, and in a moment it had enveloped me. "Sort of like teleportation," Diuniun's voice came to me faintly. "No cloud and no globe, not really. Your mind fashions them to explain an otherwise com-

plete impossibility. Clever device, the mind...."

CHAPTER IV

HERCULES AND ME

RAIN PELTED the streets of Merryville, a quick summer storm which sent everyone scurrying indoors. I guess I walked along Cedar Avenue furtively. I didn't want to meet anyone; I wouldn't know what to do. The first three, that's what Diuniun had told me; the first three would join me in this wild adventure. Or, as the little purple Overlord had put it, in this game.

For the winners, Earth.

Did you ever read a science-fiction magazine? More likely than not it contained a story of Armageddon, of man's final decisive battle against some cosmic doom. The stakes were the same, but the pawns in the game were different. Governments juggled resources to meet the threat, whole armies did battle with the hordes from space which rocketed Earthward to take our fair planet. One little city like Merryville didn't amount to much.

Now the real thing had come, and Earth plodded along in its age-old way, unknowing. Two billion people, all kinds of people in all kinds of places—and their fate would hinge on what took place in Merryville.

I wanted to curl up someplace, or maybe go on a roaring drunk. But that wouldn't be the answer. Diuniun had dealt the hand with finality while Hadman laughed derisively, and the next move was mine. I didn't know how to make it. I stood in the rain, feeling foolish, wishing I never had answered Hadman's ad, wishing I had not come to Merryville. September would find itself with a surplus of ten days this year, ten days which would be erased from the memory of man when Diuniun's game had

played its course, ten days which could be the zenith or the nadir of all man's visions and dreams and hopes. I didn't think I was the man for the job....

High heels click-clacked on the pavement behind me, beating out a brisk tempo through the steady drumming of the rain. A girl's voice called out: "Hello there! You'll be drenched to the skin if you don't get in out of this rain, Mister. Want to share my umbrella?"

I shrugged inwardly. *Now as well as ever, and the first of my trio stood just behind me.* I whirled and faced her.

AFTER A while, her face got red. I couldn't help it, I stared at her long and hard. But she didn't know why and she got the wrong idea. "Listen, Mister," she told me. "Don't think I'm picking you up or anything. I just felt sorry for you standing here in the rain, and my umbrella's big enough for two if we happen to be heading in the same direction. If those eyes are retractable like landing gears, please pull them back inside your head."

And then she started to smile. It must have been contagious, because I felt a grin spreading over my own face. The girl had a pert, intelligent face and her rainslicker failed to hide a trim figure. Nothing like Hadman, of course, but she'd look mighty good on a tennis court or in a bathing suit.

"Honey," I said, "you just don't know how far we'll be going in the same direction in the next few weeks. How would you like to save the human race?"

She was still grinning. "They gave me a course in personality and behavior at Teacher's College, before I decided to become a secretary instead. But they never included anything like you."

"Tell you what, let me buy you a drink and explain. N-no, forget it, we

might meet other people, and I want to get you all straightened out first. That's a nice big umbrella. How'd you like to walk with me for a while?"

She looked doubtful. "My mother warned me. She sure did. But Mr.—"

"Reardon. Call me Paul."

"Paul, I'll admit it. It's a brand new line and I've never heard it before. Okay, I'll walk with you because you intrigue me, but only because of that. If you're serious you're crazy, and if you're joking you have the craziest sense of humor I ever saw."

I tucked her arm under mine and the umbrella's ribs brushed my head occasionally as we walked. Laura was a short girl, no more than five feet two or three. That's her name, Laura Harris.

Well, I told her. I didn't know how else to go about it. I told her everything I knew, quietly, without any dramatics. I started with Hadman, threw in the Merryville situation, and I began to feel better when I remembered Joaquin had believed me.

It failed to get a peep out of her, not until I finished. When I got to the part about Diuniun, Laura's mouth popped open a little, but she remained silent. When I lit a cigarette and walked for half a block without saying anything she turned around to face me.

"You certainly have a vivid imagination, Paul."

"That's all you'll say? Tell me I'm nuts or something, or—"

"No. No, I won't do that. Here's the way I see it. You're a visiting fireman or some such thing in Merryville, and you're stuck here because the militia won't let you leave. You have no friends in town and you're lonely, so you want to strike up an acquaintance with a gal. I turn out to be a likely candidate, so you make with the wildest, most fantastic line since Eve told Adam all about the benefits of a certain tree. It's supposed to impress me, I guess."

"Does it?"

"No. Like before, it just intrigues me. You want a date, I'll accept it. Two dates, ditto. I'll be frank, Paul. I want to see what makes you tick, but I'd like you to admit the whole thing was a gag. Don't get me wrong; peculiar things are happening in Merryville, but I can't swallow the answer you gave me."

I shrugged. "No gag. Honest, everything I said is the truth, as far as I know. You got a telephone number?"

She gave it to me and I watched her walk away through the rain. I'd keep it on tap and as soon as Diuniun's first labor came through to start the game, I'd call her. Meanwhile, World Savers Inc. still needed two members.

I began to whistle. Hell, if the other two turned out as easy as Laura, this selection of candidates might be a lark after all.

IT DIDN'T last. Number Two bumped into me on the corner of Cedar and 12th. By that time the rain had slowed to a drizzle. Number Two showed up in the person of Harold Purness, the sour-faced co-owner of the Merryville Hotel. His partner, Springer, had been very outspoken about the mysterious damage in the Merryville's coffee shop, but Purness, who got the information second hand, took an even grimmer attitude. Someone wanted to put the Merryville out of business. Someone had thus started a campaign of terror, smacking in some unknown way of fantastic scientific powers.

"Who do you think that someone is?" I asked Purness.

"Reardon, I don't know. It's common knowledge that a lot of folks in Merryville would like to cut in on the hotel business. Mayor Quinn Berkeley, for one. Maybe some of the boys in the real estate gang. Even this Hadman dame, I don't know—say, you work for her!"

I shook my head. "Not any more. Purness, you've got your troubles, I've got mine, but I have a hunch the guy pulling the strings might turn out to be one and the same man. If I have a lead on your hotel man, shall I call you?"

A faint smile passed quickly over Purness' sour face. "You bet. Just call and I'll come running. In fact, you look like an able guy, Reardon. I'll make it worth your while—"

"Forget it. Maybe Hadman did cheat you that night at Twin Oaks, and since I was working for her, then I feel I owe you something. It's on the house, Purness, and you can bet you'll hear from me."

"Fine. Fine! Say, I have an appointment with Mayor Berkeley. Should be along any minute now. Maybe you'd like to stick around and get a line on what he says? Opposition in politics, you know. I was a candidate in the last election, and I wouldn't put it past Berkeley at all."

I STARTED to say no, because one man of Purness' ilk might be too much in this setup. I still knew nothing of Diuniun's game, but from what he had told me, cooperation seemed a keynote. I could just see Purness and Quinn Berkeley cooperating on anything short of mutual mayhem! But right then it looked like my participation in any game to save Earth for humanity might end in abortive failure because, swinging a cane jauntily, Mayor Quinn Berkeley stepped out of a car and joined us on our street corner.

Bluff, red-cheeked, he greeted Purness heartily enough, and when the hotel owner introduced me, Berkeley said: "Ah yes, Reardon! How are you, young man? Friend of Hadman, isn't it? Yes, how are you?"

"Here's something for the books," Purness said. "Reardon thinks he has a lead on that fire at the coffee shop."

"Is that so? Well, well! Good work,

my boy. Like to join us for a round or two of drinks. Heh-heh, not much to do as a mayor these days, not when the army took everything over. Say, does that mean you have an angle on the rest of this stuff in Merryville?"

"I didn't say that," I told him. "But it could be. Have you seen Hadman recently?"

"Hadman? Why, no." His face got redder. I thought, *Reardon, maybe you should have been a psychologist. You'll have this pompous guy eating out of your hands in another minute.*

Aloud, I said, "That's funny. She's been asking about you. Seems she's taken a fancy to you, Mayor." *Reardon, you lie so well, you'll be believing it yourself soon.*

"Well, hmph! She's a nice young thing, of course, but I've been so busy."

"The Mayor has a family," Purness explained, smiling. "They say his wife's maiden name must have been Xantippe. You know, wife of that old Greek, what's his name—Socrates. A shrew, a battle-ax."

"That's enough!" Quinn Berkeley shouted. "Reardon, next time Hadman asks after me, you let me know. Will you do that?"

"Sure thing, Your Honor."

Said Purness, "I thought you don't work for her now."

"Umm-mm, I don't. But I see her. I'll let you know, sir."

"And don't forget about me," Purness pleaded. "If you get a line on that hotel thing, wild horses couldn't keep me away."

I told them both that I'd remember, and then I excused myself, watching them cross the street together, Berkeley with his big bear-like strides, Purness with the cautious gait of a conservative, pessimistic man.

AND THAT was it. World Savers Inc.—membership, four. Paul Reardon, President, ex-pugilist, good for nothing much more than going a

few rounds with the local heavy-weight aspirant. Vice-presidents: Laura Harris, a sharp young thing, pert and pretty, who didn't believe a word I said but wanted to tag along because my obvious insanity amused her. Harold Purness, sour, middle-aged businessman who had a bone to pick with the unknown agent of his difficulties. Quinn Berkeley, skirt-chasing mayor extraordinary, who wanted to show his wife, Purness, and their whole social set a thing or two by capturing the fancy of an exotic woman who had taken Merryville by storm.

Four people to save the world. I shuddered. Surely the Fates were joking...

Well, joking or not, they got serious on September 1st. I'd taken a room in a small boarding house, got a job driving a delivery truck for the department store in order to pay my rent. Several days fled by. A week.

And nothing.

I met Angus in town a couple of times, and while he acted aloof, he didn't get violent. Yes, Hadman was fine. No, Hadman didn't talk about me at all. But she seemed very busy with Joaquin, and that irritated Angus, who had a dispassionate crush on her if such a thing is possible. So Hadman had declared an armistice, calling her dogs off at least until Diuniun started his game.

Merryville settled back and accepted a daily assortment of improbabilities while the army guarded and explored, investigated and theorized, all to no avail. Scientists descended on Merryville in droves. After a few days, sometimes after a few hours, most of them left town shaking their heads sadly. A cultist from Southern California claimed he could cure Merryville's ills and he was flown in air-express, but he proved a fraud when twenty-four hours alleviated nothing but the cultist's obvious desire to see Merryville firsthand. They

quietly sent him packing.

THURSDAY, September 1st.

Nothing lurid, nothing melodramatic. I'd almost been expecting visions, or at least voices. But when I reached my room after the day's work, I simply found a letter waiting for me. From Diuniun. That's what it said in the lefthand corner, where the return address belongs. *Diuniun*. His handwriting was perfect, but without style. Like those charts they have the kids copy in grade school, each letter formed simply and accurately, with no attempt at individuality. Evidently Diuniun had selected a composit sampling and his flawless script resulted.

I hesitated, staring fixedly at the envelope. Sometimes corny expressions have a way of asserting themselves in a situation that very definitely does not call for corn, and then they don't sound at all like cliches. Over and over, three words ran through my mind: *This is it...*

I lit a cigarette and inhaled so hard that it made me cough. I paced around the room, sat down for a moment on the studio couch, got up and snuffed out the cigarette, crossed to the window and watched a streetcar pull to a stop down at the corner, saw a fire engine hurtle up from the south, its siren wailing. Down the street three young soldiers flirted with a high-school girl, deciding after much debate to escort her home. A big Constellation droned high overhead.

Life went on in all its manifold ways. I wondered what they'd have done had they known...

I pulled Diuniun's message from its envelope.

To Paul Reardon, Greetings!

I observe that you have your assistants and now are ready. Of labors you shall have three, be-

cause you cannot be expected to duplicate the feats of the heroes of ancient Hellas in ten short days.

Remember, I am watching: if you win through, clearly and decisively, the Earth is yours. If not, the Overlords will return to Earth with their servants, Hadman's people, and the planet will be for Earthmen no more! Hadman watches too. Have care....

Your first labor: Hercules had his Stables to clean. Very well, you will have your moral stables. You are to clean out gambling from the Twin Oaks Inn, either tranquilly or by force, as you wish. Remember, I am a man of whims; and for this labor my whim prefers the wiles and stealth of the fox to the brawn and sinew of the lion.

You have until midnight tomorrow evening. Diuniun

I GROANED inwardly, pouring myself a shot of whiskey. I liked Joaquin. Joaquin liked me. Unconsciously, I had counted on him for some support. But now the First Labor loomed before me, and Joaquin's gambling room in the rear of Twin Oaks was a major source of income. I could just see him acquiescing...

The police, the mayor, the big wheels of Merryville's social set, all stood strongly in favor of Joaquin's gaming and all Hadman had to do was utter one word against me and my goose would broil. She'd do it, too. Well, Hadman mustn't know. I'd keep the whole thing secret; I'd—

Something, I don't know what, tore at my mind. A tugging at every atom of my brain, a twisting, roaring pain surging through my skull—and laughter. Hadman's. Peal after peal of it mocking me.

Hadman, was she somehow reading

my mind, gleaned from it the knowledge of Diuniun's First Labor? I tried to think of other things. I recited aloud. "Two times two is four, times two is eight, times two is sixteen, times two—"

Hadman's laughter swirled in my brain!

If she could run through a deck of cards and guess every one right, could she also read my thoughts like low-altitude sky-writing? Could she strip my mind of its psychic barriers and remove what knowledge she sought? I struggled, swallowing great gulps of liquor straight from the bottle to cloud my brain. I fought...

It didn't work. Almost, I could feel Hadman's mental fingers plucking, seeking, taking... When her laughter faded from my head and disappeared, more mocking than ever, I knew she did not leave empty-handed.

"HELLO. THIS is Paul Reardon."

"Paul Reardon? Paul—oh! Hi." I hardly recognized the voice at the other end of the telephone wires, since I'd spoken with Laura Harris only once, and at that briefly. "How're the Labors coming along, Hercules? Or are you ready to forget all about that?"

"Forget nothing! The first one came through today, and it's bad." I told her about Joaquin's enterprises. "So, we'll have to clean out a different kind of stable. Laura, did you mean what you told me, that you'd tag along—"

"You bet. I still can't make you out, Paul, but I want to be around when things start to happen. Pick me up at seven? Swell."

Before I cut the connection, I told her, "There'll be two other people along, but they don't know anything about this Labors stuff. So don't mention it, huh?"

"Aha!" Laura cried with mock severity. "Resorting to a subterfuge, eh? Stooping to trickery—"

"Baby, I'd stop short of nothing if it means saving the Earth. Can't you get that through your head?"

She mumbled "oh" and said something about my being incorrigible, then she hung up.

I dialed Purness, told him I had a strong lead on the coffee shop affair, and would he meet me at Twin Oaks this evening? He'd be delighted. I called Quinn Berkeley, arranging a date for him with Hadman at Twin Oaks. He'd be happy to come, thank you. I chuckled softly. What would Hadman think of the idea?

By seven-thirty, Laura and I sat at our table in Twin Oaks, ordering our first drinks. "You're not very good company," the girl told me, smiling. "You've hardly said a word."

I said I was thinking.

"What about?"

"The First Labor, of course. How the devil can we pull it off? Joaquin's gaming room opens at nine, remains opened until two. Only we've got to close it down." I snapped my fingers. "Just like that."

"The trouble with you, Paul Reardon, is that you've got no imagination. Your little purple man compares this to Hercules' task with the Augean stables, right? Well, what did Hercules do? Those stables hadn't been cleaned in years, and maybe some little imaginative gal whispered something in old Hercules' ears, because he suddenly got a brainstorm. Know what he did? He diverted the flow of a river, running it straight through the Augean mess, and washing it clean in short order."

I NODDED absently. "Have you got a brainstorm?"

As it turned out, she did. "Sure. You're too wrapped up in this thing.

You can't see the forest for the trees. Look, Paul: I don't know how, but you can divert the flow of a river too. What flows in a gaming room?"

"Why... money."

"Sure, and most of it flows into the coffers of the management. It's got to work that way because the tables are fixed! Oh, it's not crooked, not really. But just fixed enough to assure the house that even if every law of chance turns against it on any one night, it can't lose much. If you can divert that river of money, if you can make enough of it flow into the hands of the players, you'll force Joaquin to close down or go broke. Think about it, Paul."

She had an idea, all right. If I could get back into the gaming room before it opened, and if I could make some adjustments on the electromagnets under the roulette wheels, then—

I hardly had time to pursue my thoughts. Harold Purness *harumphed* over my shoulder and, after introducing him to Laura, I asked him to join us. He nodded, sat down, turned at once to business.

"What's on your mind, Reardon?"

"Not yet," I told him mysteriously. In truth, I hadn't considered what I'd tell the sour-faced man at all. "Listen," I said, hunching over and leaning my chin on my hands. "For now there's one thing you can do. See Joaquin over there, near the bar? All right, keep him there. Don't let him leave this room for the next fifteen minutes or so. Then, we'll see."

Purness shrugged. "Shouldn't be hard, although I don't figure your angle, Reardon. Okay," he said, getting up, "I'll keep old Joker occupied. Then you better have something mighty potent on your mind."

"Excuse me," I told Laura, rising. "I'll be back soon. With the way to win a million bucks, I hope."

THE THIRD match burned my fingers in the darkness of the gaming room before I realized there just weren't any electromagnets in the place. I swore softly to myself. I'd read a book once, about roulette tables and magnetic devices which keep the game going in the house's favor. Not this house, damn it! Joaquin used some other method. So, if I were to make like Hercules by diverting the flow of a certain river, I'd have to employ another method too. Only trouble was, I didn't have any.

A crack of light opened into a wide swath for a moment, then faded away again. The door to the gaming room—which meant someone lurked within it now. Well, only Laura knew I was here.

"Laura!" I whispered. "This way, over here."

Footsteps shuffled across the floor. Laura? I acted like a prize boob. Who else could it be? And so I lit a match.

It was a mistake.

Feet running, pounding heavily on the floor, then something slamming down over my shoulders, and the match snuffed out. I fought, striking out wildly with my fists, whiffing at air mostly. The silence made the whole thing seem ridiculous. Add that to the darkness, and I could have struggled in a fantastic nightmare of my own making...

Someone clutched at my legs and I stamped back and down with my heel. Contact with something soft, a hand maybe. A muttered oath, and I stood clear, breathing heavily. I hurtled toward the door, crashing into a hard barrier of human flesh halfway there.

The man grabbed me, but I had already lost my balance and when a fist pile-driven into my solar plexus all the air *whooshed* out of my lungs and I tumbled over backwards.

He was very thorough. He didn't give me a chance, following me down

and pounding my head like it was a much-abused punching bag. If I had any breath left to talk, I think I'd have hollered quits, but all I could do was lie there and take it. I took plenty. By the time someone turned on the lights and put an end to the carnage, my face must have looked like hamburger. If I could have saved the world by moving my pinky, I don't think I'd have been able to do it.

"Sol!" a voice cried. "She was right!"

"It sure looks that way. Better get her—and the boss."

I blinked, but I still couldn't see anything except a red haze. Half-conscious, I wondered idly if Diunium somehow were watching. I sure had made a mess of things.

More lights, and something cold and wet splashing over my face. A hand pushed its way under my neck and prodded. "Come on, chump. Sit up."

I made it about a third of the way, then slumped down again. More water sloshed over my face. I sat up slowly, felt myself dragged to my feet and deposited in a big chair. It felt very comfortable.

I OPENED my eyes. Phil's companion that night they almost got me with a couple of knives stood off to the left, rubbing his bruised knuckles thoughtfully. Phil himself leaned back against a dice table across the room, sitting very stiff and straight and uncomfortable, a big bandage over the bottom of his face. Angus paced back and forth nervously, muttering to himself. Hadman was smiling prettily, standing with hands on hips, drumming her fingers in an I-told-you-so way against her hip-bones. Joaquin stood at the window, hands behind his back, contemplating the night.

He whirled around and stalked in my direction, angry. "Just what the

hell were you trying to do, Paul?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," I managed to say. My voice sounded like a couple of bull-frogs arguing with each other.

"I can tell you," Hadman said. "He thought he could somehow fix your tables and win himself a pile of money."

Joaquin asked, "Is that true?"

I said nothing, but Phil's companion started to play around in an ungentle way with my bleeding face. I shrugged. "Yes and no. Yes, I tried to fix the tables. No, I didn't give a damn if I won a penny or not."

"How could you fix it?" Joaquin seemed incredulous. "Electromagnetic contraptions went out a decade ago, Paul. It's all scientifically arranged now—without any mechanical tricks. But that's not important. I liked you, Paul; you know that. Why did you try to do it?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Well, I'd suggest you attempt an explanation. Better grasp at straws, Paul, because you haven't got much else to grasp at."

"I say kill him," Phil mumbled thickly under his bandages. You couldn't blame him. Phil had never been a lovely creature, but that night I think I had done a good job of worsening what all the little genes and chromosomes had put together.

"Naa." This was Phil's companion of that escapade. "Not with all them soldiers in town. We'd never get away with it."

Joaquin was still angry, and ready to vent his spleen in any direction. "If you gentlemen will shut up, we can get on with this."

Maybe if I goaded him, I thought, he'd switch targets altogether. I guess I really was grasping at straws, because I had a hunch that's what my life hung on right now—a thin, bending straw. "Say," I told Joaquin, "I

thought you said you'd get rid of these two boys after what they tried to do?"

He spread his hands out wide. "Hadman wanted them to stay. Hadman—"

"Oh. Hadman, eh?" I smiled.

JOAQUIN came close, but he did not lose his composure. He lit a cigarette, stalked to and fro for a while. By the time he turned to face me again, he inhaled slowly and let the smoke curl from his nostrils, the polished Continental again. "Now, Paul—why?"

"Remember that day I came here? Remember I said I thought a whole lot more than Merryville stood in the balance? It's like that. Just give me time, Joaquin, a little time. If I can't prove it to you in ten days, or if you aren't willing to forget about the whole thing, I'll surrender myself to you. I mean it." I did, too. Because in ten days we'd know one way or the other. In ten days mankind would either own the Earth again, or mankind would start packing for an Exodus which probably would spell doom for the race.

Hadman was furious, but she didn't show it. I got to know her little quirks. A muscle twitched vaguely in her cheek, she brushed a lock of wine-red hair from her brow, her fingers twined together. She could have been a study in indifference, but she was boiling. "Don't listen to him, Enrico. The least you can do is throw him out and tell him to stay out." Sure, that would suit her fine, because then Labor One would go by the board a complete failure.

I snickered. "So you kept Phil and his boyfriend on Hadman's orders, huh? Tch-tch." *Play on his pride, I thought, because the man has plenty,*

"T...uh...."

"And now you'd listen to her again,

not even giving me a chance. Just the ten days I asked for. Who owns this place, Joaquin, you or Hadman?"

Hadman laughed nervously. "Don't you see what he's trying to do? Work around your pride, that's what—"

"Shut up, both of you!" Joaquin stormed. "Let me think, think—ahh!—what's the use? I stand to lose both ways. I... Paul, you have your ten days. You're free to do what you want. No, Hadman, don't say another word. I have spoken, and that is my decision."

"You'll probably regret it," said Hadman.

I got up, weak and dizzy, and headed for the washroom. "He won't," I told her. "Not if he's smart. But I hope to hell you will, Hadman."

CHAPTER V

OF LABORS THREE

I TOOK TWO handfuls of paper towel out of the automatic dispensing machine in the washroom, soaking them thoroughly and bathing my face with them. I observed my work in the mirror, deciding that I didn't look too bad. A mouse showed signs of developing under my right eye and my jaw was bruised and tender on both sides.

But any way you looked at it, Hadman had me coming and going. She had read my mind, she knew what I planned—and the result came close to placing me on my back in a casket. I couldn't doubt that Diuniun was aware of her unfair advantage. The power resided in his hands and he had yielded it to her. What was it Diuniun had told me; the essence of his purple-skinned folk was fairness? Something like that, and it gave me an idea. If I could be vouchsafed the same power...

A washroom is a ridiculous place for a kind of seance, but nevertheless I found myself talking to thin air.

"Diuniun, Diuniun, can you hear me?"
Nothing.

A stupid gesture and I was ready to give it up after the first try. Lord, I really wanted a miracle. How far could the little purple man's ability extend?

You're troubled, Paul Reardon. Can I help?

Mellow harp strings—a voice! Not aloud, but strumming musically inside my skull. Diuniun!

"You're damn right I'm in trouble." I proceeded to tell him.

I know. And there is much to what you say. You suggest that out of fairness I should equalize things. But Reardon, if I gave you a limited form of ESP, you'd not be responding with the native abilities of your people. I question the fairness in that... ..

"Hell, how did Hadman get her own precognition?"

Why, I gave it to her. Yes, I did. Umm-mm. Then perhaps I could equalize the situation by withdrawing it. Yes...

The little wheels within wheels spun around madly inside my head. Ideas came fast and furious, tumbling one atop the other. No, I wouldn't want Diuniun to do that. I had a much better plan. "Why don't you give me the same power instead?" I demanded. "Hadman's used it all along, and the least you can do—"

For the first time, Diuniun sounded mildly angry. *Don't tell me what I can do. That's Hadman's trouble. But I see you mean no harm. Reardon, I grant it! Simple—precognition exists potentially in the frontal lobes of every man's brain. Just a question of applying it. In two hundred years, perhaps, your whole race—Well, no matter. You now have a limited form of ESP, Paul Reardon. Good Luck!*

That was all. A porter stood, scratching his head, in the alcove which led to the washroom. Evidently he'd eavesdropped on the one-way

monologue, and now his eyes followed me as I departed. I could almost feel them piercing the back of my head.

LAURA SAT sipping another drink. Purness was looking at his wrist-watch. And Quinn Berkeley had joined them, garbed in a mayor's Sunday best.

"What on earth happened to you?" This was Laura. "You look like—"

"I tried to keep him at the bar," Purness said, "but some of his flunkies called, and he went running. I'd never have suspected Joaquin had anything to do with that coffee shop thing."

"I didn't say he had."

"Wh-what? Then why all the commotion?"

"When do I get my chance to meet Hadman?" Mayor Berkeley wanted to know.

"Paul," Laura again, "did my plan backfire, did it kick you like a mule? My gosh, I'm sorry."

"Hey, whoa! One at a time. I can't follow all of you." As a matter of fact, I could. I somehow grasped all the thoughts before they were uttered, and that supplied at least one answer. Di-union, bless him, had come across. Precognition....

"What happens next?" Purness growled. "I broke an engagement to come here, and—"

Precognition, I realized, wouldn't do it alone. I needed Berkeley and Purness because their wallets bulged with the good green stuff which, applied expertly, might yet chalk up Labor One on Earth's side.

"Laura," I said, "your plan only backfired once. But it didn't fail without giving us a better one—same general idea. You know, that diverted river."

"What are you talking about?" Quinn Berkeley's voice boomed. "I came here because you assured me a date with Hadman. I'm here. Where's Hadman? I don't understand what's

going on—"

"Nor do I," Purness joined him, irritably.

I smiled. What a motley crew of World Savers! "Listen," I said, "if you can forget temporarily, both of you, what I called you here for, how'd you like to make a killing? Enough to put you on easy street for a long time?"

"I don't need it, thanks," Purness said. "I make plenty of money... But if you say it's a sure thing—"

"You bet," I told him. "Sure thing. Mayor Berkeley?"

His Honor rubbed his hands together. "Well, a mayor's salary doesn't exactly make you a millionaire. I'm game—if I like your proposition. Let's hear it."

"We just go back to the gaming room and play some roulette," I told them blandly.

"That, does it!" Purness cried, standing up. "The man's crazy. You can't beat the house at roulette, Rear-don. I'm going home."

I shoved him back down in his seat. "Just a chance," I said. "All I want you to do is watch me at that roulette table. If you like what you see, you can play along. If not—okay, you beat it."

Purness sat down, grumbling. Mayor Berkeley lit a long cigar and puffed away on it thoughtfully. Laura was laughing. "Paul! Paul, you almost can convince a girl—"

I winked at her. "Just give me time, baby."

She looked doubtfully at my battered face. "If you stay in one piece long enough, Paul."

NINE-THIRTY. Hadman ran off-stage amidst thundrous applause. People began to drift into the gaming room.

I purchased twenty dollars' worth of chips—four blues. Laura followed me

doubtfully, Quinn Berkeley and Purness with open scorn on their faces. The croupier at the roulette wheel looked like an anxious little penguin with a hyperthyroid condition, hands and eyes darting nervously, tongue licking thin lips, formal clothing all neat and stiff. "Your bets, gentlemen," he droned.

Out of nowhere, the number fourteen spun into my mind. I was nervous. Diuniun's ESP gift—or an overwrought imagination grasping at more straws? I shoved two blue chips into the square marked fourteen. Two or three other gamblers placed their bets.

The croupier spun his wheel.

It whirled swiftly, then the whirring sound slowed into a shrill tattoo of clicks. The little pellet jumped crazily from socket to socket. Jumped—

"Fourteen and red," droned the croupier, raking a pile of chips in my direction.

"Gosh!" Laura squeezed my hand.

Berkeley cleared his throat, the tip of his cigar glowing a bright red. "Luck," Purness growled under his breath.

My head pounded dully—and something whispered "eight" over and over again. I stacked ten blues carefully in the square marked with the number eight, watching the croupier activate his machine.

"Eight and red," he said, and the blue chips made a jumbled heap in front of me.

I smiled. "It all rides on twenty-three."

"All of it?" demanded the croupier, his eyes very bright.

"That's what I said."

Quinn Berkeley ran to the teller's window for chips, returning with a few hundred dollars worth. He grinned nervously, counting out a pile of chips. "A hundred dollars on twenty-three," he said.

Purness merely grunted, and the

wheel spun again.

"Twenty-three and black," the croupier informed us, running a finger between his collar and his neck. Berkeley and I now had a small mountain of chips between us.

I said, "Twenty-three looks fine again. All mine ride right there."

The Mayor chuckled at some secret joke. "Me too," he declared.

Purness sent a boy running for chips, receiving them in time to put fifty dollars on twenty-three. Laura clutched my arm. "Paul, Paul—what's happening? You'll have me believing every word you said in another moment. Three straight wins. You know what the odds are against that?"

BY NOW the dice tables, the chuck-a-luck cages, the black-jack and red-dog boards—all had been deserted. Joaquin's steerers gave it up as a hopeless cause when no one could be enticed away to the other games, and the steerers also came to watch. A big half-circle formed in the glaring yellow light of the roulette table, and scores of chips cascaded down on twenty-three.

Sweating now under the hot lights, the croupier spun his wheel. His slightly ruffled, "Twenty-three and red" sounded like thunder in the silence.

People grinned, pounded one another on the back, then turned to wait for my next move. The croupier had to send for another basket of chips and, plainly, he was worried.

"A m a z i n g!" Quinn Berkeley boomed. "Positively amazing!"

Purness said, "I take it back, Rear-don. I don't know how you do it, and I don't care, as long as you can keep it up."

"It's better than a date with Hadman anytime," Berkeley admitted.

"What is?"

I whirled about. Hadman stood at my shoulder.

She wore a low-cut gown which would make a television neckline look like a turtle-neck sweater. Her perfume was not of this world, it would have caused too much trouble. Under her breath she mumbled, "That's a cheap trick, Paul."

I laughed. "You didn't mind using it, did you? With these stakes, Hadman, I'd do anything." I meant it. You don't get squeamish when the Earth hangs in the balance. I turned to the croupier. "Everything on twenty-five."

The croupier snapped his fingers, and a boy ran up to him. "Call Mr. Joaquin," the sweating man told him. "Quickly."

He fumbled with a cigarette, inserting it in a long silver holder. He took a lot of trouble with his lighter to kill time. Joaquin elbowed through the crowd before the wheel was spun. He took in the situation with a quick professional glance, looked at the croupier who muttered, "Bad, Mr. Joaquin. Very bad."

Joaquin shrugged gamely. "All right," he said. "I'll spin the wheel myself." He did.

"Twenty-five and black," he said a moment later.

I GRABBED his arm and led him, unresisting, toward a corner of the room. The crowd stirred uneasily when I left the table, and Purness tried to stop me. I shoved him away.

"Joaquin, you remember what Hadman could do with the cards? It's like that with me now. I can't lose."

He smiled. "Life is a gamble, my friend. But what under God could give you that power?"

I didn't attempt to answer. Instead, I said, "Remember, Joaquin, a lot more than Merryville will be determined by what happens here?"

"What had that to do with me?"

"Plenty. Can your man cover again

if I call another number with most of the people in this room tagging along?"

"No," he admitted. "We'd go broke. Still, we can't stop. I'd be a laughing stock. I'd—"

"Damn it, Joaquin, swallow your pride! Swallow it so you can live to play again tomorrow."

"What would you have me do?"

"Close the gambling hall—for ten days. That's all I ask."

"Fantastic! I can't do that—"

He needed a way to save face, if not with his friends, at least with himself. I sensed that he was groping for one now, wondering if I had one to give him. "Listen," I tried to soothe him, "I have three—directives. One of them is this: a petulant, arbitrary thing, but there it is. Hell, I don't want your money. I just want you to close. Joaquin, you, everybody, the whole human race would want me to win. Three directives, and this is the first. Do you close?"

He mused, half to himself, about Hadman, about Merryville's losing fight with improbabilities, about the power to foresee. He said, "By God, Paul, if you're lying—"

"I'm not. Shut down and we can all go home happy. Round one will be over."

He didn't answer, and I thought for a moment I had lost. He ran a hand through his sleek black hair, arranged his bow-tie carefully, flicked a speck of lint off the shoulder of his tuxedo. He walked slowly, as in a daze, to the far end of the room, past the idle rows of chuck-a-luck cages, past the dice waiting patiently on their green cushions, past the neatly-stacked cards on the black-jack tables.

He reached the far wall, still in deep thought, and he banged on the wall for silence. Heads lifted from their concentration on the roulette table, and soon everyone in the hall

had turned to face him.

"My friends," Joaquin said slowly, "I won't attempt to explain. Sometimes a man of headstrong pride, a man such as you know your friend Joaquin to be, can be struck—struck just once in his lifetime—by whatever mysterious thing there is that makes people humble. Thus, it is not due to any reverses we may have suffered, and it is not because of anything I can tell you, but the gaming room will be closed for the next ten days.

"Wait." He held up his hands for silence. "Life goes on elsewhere in Twin Oaks. All drinks tonight are on the house, and Hadman will dance as she never has danced before. Now please cash in your chips."

LAURA WAS a little tight as we took a taxi home. "What did you do with all the money you won, Paul?"

"I gave it back to Joaquin," I told her. "The poor guy can use it."

"You—what? Paul, you positively intriguing idiot—I believe you! Yes, I believe everything you told me. Ooo—Paul..."

She slumped over toward me, her head lolling on my shoulder. "Paul, I feel so giddy—"

I cupped her cheeks in my hands and kissed her. It seemed the natural thing to do. No wild, impossible other-worldly passion in that kiss, not the kind that Hadman offered with her lips. But Laura did not respond with a sisterly peck. She clung to me fiercely, and I heard the driver snickering as we went at it. Laura could hold her own with the girls of Earth, and that was enough.

It was then that the cab stopped with a screeching of brakes and a whining protest from its tires. A big gray sedan had forced us off the road and onto its shoulder.

The cabby flung his door open and hopped out, a big clumsy man. "What

the hell is this?" he demanded. Then: "Cripes, a gun! Okay, boys—I'm sorry. I don't care what the hell it is. Just lemme alone."

Phil's bandaged face peered into the back window. "Come on out, you two?"

We got out. Phil climbed into the back seat of the sedan beside us, holding a snub-nosed .45 idly in his hand. "No tricks," he warned.

In the darkness, his companion struck heavily at the cab-driver's head, with a gun probably. The cabbie moaned once, then fell on his face.

The road to Twin Oaks winds its way outside of Merryville, but the army had decided to include Joaquin's establishment as part of the city limits, and only routine questioning faced us at the beginning of Main Street. Phil kept us very quiet in the back seat, and when the driver responded to his interrogators, I recognized Angus' voice!

WE DROVE in silence down into the slums which border on the railroad tracks, and Angus pulled the car smoothly into an ancient weather-beaten garage.

"Out," Phil barked. "Don't tempt me, Reardon, 'cause I'd love to knock you off. Just give me a lead."

He wasn't kidding. If he lived to be a hundred, he wouldn't forget that night I kicked his teeth in.

Angus seemed apologetic, but then Angus had changed. He spoke almost in a whine, his eyes casting anxious, furtive glances in all directions. He was, I realized, wound hopelessly around Hadman's little finger.

The house adjacent to the garage was an old clapboard affair. Shingles which had fallen from the roof lay untouched on the sparse lawn. The gate squeaked when Phil opened it, and his key found the going difficult with the tumblers in the door lock.

"Hurry up," Angus told him. "She

said to hurry."

"Keep your shirt on, Scotty. She'll keep another minute."

We climbed a flight of stairs, dimly lit by a dirty glazed bulb on the landing. Phil ushered us into a large living room on the second floor, shoving us forward unnecessarily. Laura stumbled and fell, moaning; and I wheeled about, ready to jump at the gunman.

He waved his .45 in my face. "I wouldn't advise it, chum. But cripes, it's your life. Go ahead."

"Stop it," Hadman said. She came to us from the far end of the living room. Not a flicker of emotion crossed her features, but she slapped Phil smartly across the face. "I didn't say anything about getting rough, did I? Why don't you follow instructions, like Angus?"

Angus liked that. He beamed. I almost thought he'd sound off like a contented lap dog. And the web had been woven at least partially about Phil. He took the blow stolidly, even mumbling he was sorry.

I tried to read Hadman's mind with the powers Diuniun had given me—and got a blank!

"Don't try so hard," she said. "Diuniun stripped you of your ESP. He knew what you wanted it for, let you use it for that. But it ends right here."

SO I WAS on my own. With two labors to go. But hell, I couldn't even get started, couldn't even find out what they were, not with Phil's gun staring down my throat. I asked Hadman, "Why'd you bring us here?"

"Don't tell me you don't know! You won on your first task, Paul. That's enough. Old Diuniun might get bitter if I had you killed outright, so I decided to detain you instead. Ten days, that's not a very long time. Ten days—and then the Earth is mine! Could you realize what it would be like for my people, living like a bunch of Spartans off on the other end of the Gal-

axy, to find a green Earth waiting for them?—Oh, Diuniun and his crowd don't much care. They're versatile, they can adapt to almost any environment. But my people, we were born for Earth just as you were."

"Nuts," I told her. "Diuniun let me in on that. You grew spoiled out there in space. You don't deserve anything, let alone this planet."

—Hadman's laughter was mocking. "Well, we're going to get it, with the Overlords. You know, Paul, of all the men of Earth you alone I could have liked; could have—well, no matter. You brought all this on yourself...."

Angus did not understand much of the conversation, but he hated those last words. He still looked like a puppy, but not a lap-dog. Rather, a beaten cur now, sulking off in a corner. Hadman must have noticed. She called, softly, "Come here, Angus."

He came to her, licking his internal wounds. She stroked him! Yes, stroked him—running her hand slowly along the nape of his neck; along his shoulders, his arm—exactly the way you might pet an animal. Angus smiled quite contentedly when she finished, and Phil scratched his head.

"What a bunch o' loons!" he said. "I dunno—"

"Well, this much you know," Hadman told him. "Paul and this girl here—" Laura had slumped down dejectedly in a chair, very tired, and more than a little high—"Paul and this girl will use that room down the hall. You guard it, Phil, alternating with Angus. They are not to leave. Is that understood?"

"Sure," Phil smiled cheerfully. This was something he could comprehend, and he liked the idea. He'd even like it better if we tried to escape, because then he'd have a good excuse to ventilate me with his .45. It's a big gun and it makes big holes. I could just see Phil smiling out from behind the acrid

smoke with his bandaged face. But if it came to that, I wouldn't see anything at all.

We were dog-tired, Laura and I, by the time Phil pushed us ahead of him into the room, then went out, closing and locking the door behind him. Laura threw herself across the bed, sobbing a little. Then she stopped. She sat up, smiling through her tears.

"Scared, kid?" I asked her. I had crossed the room to its one window, found that it was barred—a new job and a quick one, because the plaster still was fresh and a lot of it had caked loosely around the sill.

"I—I guess so," Laura admitted. "But not anymore, Paul. Gee, I was crying just like a baby, wasn't I? Well, it won't happen again. And whatever does happen, I believe you. And the whole thing still intrigues me."

IT INTRIGUED her! Guarded by a trigger-happy gunman, and she was intrigued. I grunted something about that under my breath, but then I smiled. In spite of this mess, I found myself liking Laura more and more every moment.

"I can't help it," Laura told me, smiling now. "I guess I always liked to see new and different things because—"

"I know. They intrigue you!" I laughed, then stretched myself out on the floor.

"Don't tell me you're going to sleep there!"

"Where else?" The room had a chest-of-drawers, two, straight-backed chairs, and the one big over-sized bed.

Laura patted the other side of the bed. "Why, right here, of course."

"Huh?"

"My gosh, Paul. I can trust you."

Well, that's the way Laura is. And I wouldn't have believed it myself. I got up and lay on one side of the bed, near the edge. Laura isn't very big,

and she lay on the other side. There was a lot of room between us, and it stayed that way all night. What's the word, Platonic? I didn't even kiss her goodnight, maybe I didn't trust myself. But Laura did. She was breathing easily in a couple of minutes.

And she had a good-morning kiss for me which made everything seem worth our trouble. I don't go around probing into my emotions, because that has a way of spoiling them. But in the morning I knew I was falling in love with Laura.

What did it matter? I could hear Angus or Phil walking around outside. It looked a hell of a lot like mankind was doomed.

THE DAYS swept by alarmingly fast. Twice daily, Phil brought us food, making snide remarks about the closeness of our relationship in the little room. We heard muted evidence of a lot of activity on the ground floor. By day, a whole battery of workmen would arrive, clattering around with their tools and lumber, converting the dilapidated old house, I reasoned, into a sort of mansion for Hadman who by this time scoffed at hotel rooms and their transient nature.

Several times we tried to attract their attention. I stamped on the floor, beat at the door with my fists. Laura yelled until her throat was sore. But downstairs the tools clattered merrily away and I told Laura once, ruefully, that it was like spitting against the wind.

On Wednesday of the following week, Phil didn't think so. He barged into our room without warning, and I felt like a kid caught with his fist in the cookie jar. Phil had a sense of humor. Quite innocently, he thanked me for the opportunity, then slashed down with the butt of his pistol across my forehead.

Just like that. No preambles. I re-

member staggering back across the bed, remember Phil whistling as he stalked from the room. Then my head was pillowed in Laura's lap. She had wet a towel in the bathroom which adjoins our quarters and the water sloshed down across my face as she soothed my forehead with it. "Feel better, honey?"

I grinned. "I guess it didn't work, kid. You know what today is? Wednesday. The seventh day. Three more to go, and then we lose. What the hell, even if we got out today, we wouldn't have time to play around with Diuniun's next two labors."

Laura wrung the towel out over my face and I got up spluttering. "Hey—cut it out!"

"Cut it out nothing! Don't talk like that, that's all. We don't lose until your little purple friend carts us off someplace like the Pied Piper. And don't you forget it."

I didn't. There was more optimism in Laura with her chestnut hair and pert little face than in a hall full of sweepstakes ticket holders. Unfortunately, mere optimism wouldn't be enough, not with the deadline for Diuniun's decision coming on Saturday.

The activity in Hadman's rapidly blossoming mansion did not abate in the early morning hours. Each evening she'd go to Twin Oaks for her two appearances, and she'd never return alone. Often we heard voices downstairs, most of which we failed to recognize. But there was a lot of gaiety and a lot of laughter, and three times at least we thought we heard Quinn Berkeley's booming accents.

ON THURSDAY morning I got a message from Diuniun. I don't know how he posted his last letter, and he certainly couldn't post one to me this time. Instead, he talked inside my head, like that time at the wash-

room seance. It came as a faint buzzing first, the kind you hear when you pick up a seashell and hold it near your ear. I must have stood like a devotee at some invisible shrine, because Laura looked at me queerly. I held a finger to my lips for silence, and she didn't argue. By this time she was willing to accept anything.

The buzzing melted into the harptones of Diuniun's voice! *Hercules had his animals to tame—the Nemean Lion, the Hydra, others. There are in Merryville men who are Hadman's animals. These you are to tame in one way or another, Angus McDougle, Joaquin, Mayor Berkeley. The time grows short, Reardon....*

"What happened?" Laura said.

"Diuniun spoke. Yeah, stop looking at me like that. Okay?"

"O—okay, I guess. You don't mind if I'm a little doubtful?"

I shrugged. "Two things about his message stink to high heaven. First, he must know we're trapped here, but he didn't say a thing about it. He—"

"He's not going to do our work for us, that's all. You told me he said you'd have to win through on your own merits."

"All right. I'll grant that. But he said Quinn Berkeley was one of Hadman's cronies."

"So what? We'll have to believe him, Paul. We heard Berkeley here a few times, remember? I only saw your gal Hadman a couple of times, and not too closely. But she has sex appeal with the biggest capital S ever written. Berkeley would be a natural for her. Boy, what I wouldn't do with that figure...."

I looked Laura up and down severely, and after a while she got alarmed. "Hey, what are you trying to do?"

"I'm just making comparisons," I laughed. "Laura, you don't have to take a back seat, not for my money. When we get out of here—"

Then she was cuddling in my arms, and she fit there. "Paul, do you think we'll ever get out? I mean alive? I mean, in time? Paul—"

Well, that was Laura. She had dropped her optimism in my lap, and it left her afraid.

CAME FRIDAY night, we both were afraid. Downstairs, Quinn Berkeley's voice shook the walls. Once or twice we heard another man talking, possibly Joaquin. I fingered the swollen cut on my forehead, and Laura said: "Do you really want to try again?"

I patted her hand, kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Listen, don't you do an about-face. Of course we're going to try. Only this time we're going to make so much noise that the whole neighborhood comes running."

I lifted one of the straight-backed chairs over my head and brought it down with a crash on the floor, selecting a man-sized club out of the debris. I commenced beating a war-chant with it, and I didn't stop for breath.

Laura cried "Help!" over and over again, at the top of her voice. It can be a very effective word. It's sure to bring results, time-tests like all those products you hear about via the radio. Only sometimes the nature of the results are a problem. We heard a key slipping into the lock, heard the tumblers fall. Phil poked his angry face inside the door, this time minus the bandages. His jaw looked a little crooked. His gun didn't.

"Son," he gritted, "you're gonna wish you went to sleep early tonight."

He came for me, the .45 gripped in his hand like a club.

My club was bigger.

I hid it behind my back until Phil's face leered not a yard from me, until he lifted the gun over his head and started it on its downward arc. Then

I struck, and it sounded just like a big stick breaking when the chair-leg bounced off Phil's jaw—his newly healed, if crooked, jaw. There wasn't a scratch on the chair-leg.

I think that as he fell Phil knew his jaw had fractured again, because his scream was as much one of indignation as of pain. A nasty break this time, with a jagged chunk of bone protruding out of the lacerated skin below his lips.

Laura turned away, and I tossed her the .45. "I kind of favor this club," I told her, hefting it in my hands.

She looked at me. "Don't act melodramatic!"

"I'm not. If I ran downstairs with that gun, I'd be liable to shoot up everything in sight." I guess I was plenty mad. Phil deserved all he got, but that wasn't it. Angus and Joaquin played Hadman's game, and Earth hung in the balance. Angus I couldn't blame—he didn't know what was going on. But Joaquin knew at least the half of it, and Quinn Berkeley, well, we'd have to see about His Honor.

As we ran down the stairs I called over my shoulder, "You know how to use that thing? You squeeze the trigger and brace yourself so the recoil doesn't knock you through the wall."

THEY SAT in the parlor, its walls freshly papered, playing bridge. That's what I said, with the fate of the world dangling before their eyes they played bridge!

"...this is slaughter," Joaquin was saying. "You can read those cards even before they're played, Hadman."

"I doubt it," Major Berkeley assured him. Some men never learn. "It's just incredible luck my partner's got, like that time what's-his-name—Reardon?—like that time he had a run at roulette. Of course, if you and

McDougle here want to quit—"

Of them all, Angus was the most anxious "What's keeping Phil so long? You'd think he'd be down by now."

Hadman smiled. "Don't worry. The way he feels about our friend upstairs, Phil can take care of himself."

"Who is upstairs, anyway?" Joaquin demanded, putting his cards down. "Who's been making all that noise?"

"Ah! This was Hadman. "Hear him? He's coming downstairs now. What say, Enrico? Who's up there? Why, no one important. Don't let it disturb you. Don't—"

"I was upstairs," I said.

Laura wouldn't be outdone. "Me too."

Angus got up fast, starting toward us, but he stared at the gun in Laura's hand, and he sat down again.

"Reardon!" Mayor Berkeley boomed. "This is an unexpected pleasure. Whatever happened after you won all that money at Twin Oaks? Lord, will you tell that young woman to put that thing down?"

Hadman seemed unruffled. "I too heard Diuniun's second message, Paul. Just what do you think you're going to do, kill us all?"

"Kill us!" cried Quinn Berkeley. "Hah-hah, you're joking. Hadman, how you can joke! You—are joking? Hadman? Why should Reardon want to kill us? Reardon," he blubbered, "please tell me she's joking!"

"You see," Hadman observed coolly, "they don't even know what's happening. You can't destroy them, Paul, because there are certain laws here which would carry the game through to its logical conclusion, destroying you as well. And the girl, such a pretty little thing. Would you want her destroyed?"

"Go to hell," I said. "You don't talk your way out of anything this time." I crossed the room to a large

bay window, half-hidden behind elaborate drapery. "We don't have to kill them, just detain them till tomorrow night." Joaquin sighed when I ripped down the drapes.

I TORE THEM into a dozen thick strips, twisting these to give them strength, then I said: "Laura, you stand right there. If anyones moves, don't ask questions, just shoot. I'm going to tie them—"

My mistake was starting with Quinn Berkeley. Hadman had planted the idea of impending death in his head, and it stuck there. He was sweating profusely as I approached, probably thinking that I'd garrot him with the drapery. Had I trussed one of the others up first it might have been different. But Berkeley quaked like a cornered animal and, like a cornered animal, he was possessed of desperate cunning.

From him of all people I didn't expect trouble. I ordered him to clasp his hands over his head, and he brought them up to obey. They failed to stay there. I crouched in close to wrap a coil of the torn drapery around them, and they swung down from above, clubbing the back of my neck like a sledge-hammer. I fell heavily across Berkeley's knees, momentarily stunned, and he tugged at a fistful of my hair with each hand.

His voice rumbled up out of a deep well, and vaguely I heard him cry, "Grab him, somebody! I can't hold on forever. Obviously, he's crazy."

Angus had another idea. He dove for Laura, jarring her knees with his shoulder. They hit the floor in a heap, rolling over and over, and then I pulled clear of Berkeley, lumbering to my feet and weaving around the room groggily. I picked up my club and stumbled toward their whirling, twisting bodies, but I was too late.

Laura lay in a sobbing, huddled heap and Angus sat near her, panting. He waved the .45 at me. "Get the hell back, Paul, or I'll kill you."

He wasn't kidding.

"I'LL CALL the police," Quinn Berkeley suggested, crossing the room toward the telephone table. "We'll have these lunatics locked up."

Hadman barred his way. "You'll do nothing of the sort. Sit down."

"What? Why shouldn't I call them? Why—"

Hadman said nothing. She twined her arms around Berkeley's neck and cooed at him, "You're so strong and—won't you do that for me?"

Quinn Berkeley was at Angus' I-like-to-be-pampered stage. But he didn't stay there long. There was something of confusion in his beady eyes, and something of fear. He pulled his big bulk away from Hadman, and she seemed so surprised that she didn't try to stop him. The Mayor said, mumbling half to himself, "No, it isn't right. I don't know what, I don't know why, but I fear you're acting outside the law here. I really fear it. No, keep away. I wanted you, Hadman. I—I still do. But all my life I rubbed my nose in the gutter to become mayor. Yes, in the gutter. And I won't jeopardize that. I'm through with you, Hadman."

He turned and started to walk away from her slowly. She shrugged. "It's just as well. We'll separate the sheep from the wolves here and now. What about you, Angus?"

He came to her quickly, and she let him hold her hand. He was content.

Joaquin scratched his head. Laura and I stood still, because although he was busy, Angus' gun-hand still pointed in our direction. Quinn Berkeley sat on the sofa, his chin resting on his hands.

I shuddered, thinking what a whole race of Hadmans, male and female, could do to our world. Oh, Diuniun and his fellows would be there too, but I suspected they'd remain aloof, relegating the task of evacuation to Hadman's gang. A word, a glance, a gesture—and they'd have the evacuees streaming into Diuniun's ships like a horde of lemmings.

I said to Joaquin, "Remember, a lot more than Merryville is at stake. There are millions of Hadmans, waiting to come here, waiting to weave their magic, waiting to take over our world. Could you see us resisting when that happens?"

"She's not of this world, then? Would you say that?" cried Joaquin. I nodded.

"Then if she can do that to men," he gestured at Angus, "she is a spawn of the Devil. Surely not of God, Paul, because He would not permit such things." Joaquin sighed. "I longed to take her to couch with me. Hadman would play there like no woman ever did. Still, too long have I seen this strife from her camp. And now, like an ugly boil, I believe the strife is coming to a head. Perhaps I should see it from your camp, Paul, before I behave like that." He looked with contempt at Angus and spat on the floor, ranging himself beside Laura and me.

Hadman didn't even look at him. She took the .45 from Angus' nerveless fingers. "Angus," she said, "you will take the girl outside and wait in the car."

For a moment I stood between them, but Hadman waved me away irritably with her gun, and I watched helplessly as Angus led Laura, dazed and unresisting, through the door. Hadman turned to me. "I happen to know what Diuniun's next command will be, Paul. You'll never make it.

"You won't even come close." She wheeled about, opening the door and going out after Angus, her hips still swaying seductively. She had that to the last. I guess it was a part of her.

This time I didn't bat an eyelash when Diuniun's voice plucked its harp-strings inside my head. *Hercules had his Queen of the Amazons, Reardon, and you have your Hadman. Bring her to me.* And that was all.

I heard Hadman's car roar away from the curb outside.

CHAPTER VI

THE FINAL MAGIC

I SHOOK Quinn Berkely's shoulder.

"Better call your cops now. There's an injured man upstairs. And give me the keys to your car, quick!"

Dumbly, he fumbled in his pocket, then held the keys out for me.

With Joaquin sitting beside me, I kicked over the engine of Berkeley's Oldsmobile just as the tail lights of Hadman's car disappeared around a corner two blocks away. It was a hell of a time to think of Laura, but right then she was as important to me as the fate of the world.

Both would need an awful lot of saving.

We got a flat tire a street or two this side of the military barrier at the end of Main Street. I can't be sure, but I don't think it was an accident. More of Hadman's magic, and actually it didn't seem like much in the light of what she'd done in Merryville.

I cursed impotently, pulled the Olds to a stop and hurtled out of it. Joaquin was right behind me when we reached an M.P. lounging idly against the barricade. "What's the trouble, friends?"

"Did you pass a car through here a minute ago?"

"Sure. Going out along the road to Twin Oaks. Ain't no law against it."

I had no time to explain. Instead, I brought a haymaker up from the ground and let him have it flush on the mouth. He sighed, slumping against the fence and coming to rest in an inert heap at my feet.

A jeep was parked on the other side of the barricade with two officers inside studying a map. I grabbed the fallen M.P.'s rifle and vaulted over the fence. Silent as a ghost, Joaquin followed.

I barked at the two officers: "Climb out of there."

"Eh? What's that?"

I poked the major's belly with my bayonet. "I said, get out. I'm not kidding. Come on, scat! And leave the keys in the ignition."

"It's a federal offense—"

"Let me worry about that," I told them as I prodded them away from the jeep.

Then we were off, bumping and bouncing along the road to Twin Oaks. Joaquin said, "Do you see them?"

I shook my head. "No. We wasted too much time with those soldiers."

"Do you know where you're going?"

"N-no," I admitted. "You think Hadman would have any unfinished business at Twin Oaks?"

Joaquin told me he doubted it. But he thought it was as good a place as any. The plain fact stared us in the face: we didn't know what to do. Four A.M. Saturday morning, with Diuniun's decision coming at midnight. With Laura in Hadman's clutches...

WE SAT AT the deserted bar, drinking beer. There wasn't a thing we could do. I stared at Joaquin, Joaquin stared at me, and then the gambler laughed.

"It is funny," he said. "The military will be here soon, looking for their

jeep. And all we can do is sit and get morose because we don't know where to find Hadman. Paul, can't you think of something—some clue which might lead us to her?"

"I drank the beer in great gulps, popping the caps off new bottles almost as fast as Joaquin could get them from the icebox. "Hell, no," I told him. "I don't know a thing which—wait a minute! Yeah, wait! Come on—" I tugged at his arm, toppling his glass and spilling its contents all over the floor..

"Where to?"

We gunned the jeep back along the road to Merryville just as the sun started to climb over the low hills to the East. "I just remembered something," I cried over the shrieking wind which a jeep meets bounding along a bumpy road at seventy miles an hour. "That day Hadman met me in her convertible, that day I was whisked away upstairs, somehow Hadman followed in a few minutes, saying something about a scout plane. It just took a few minutes, so it must have been nearby. Yes—and here's where she met me."

I stopped the jeep and we climbed out. "So what would have prevented her from taking off before this?" Joaquin demanded.

It was a good question, but Hadman supplied the answer.

A shower of stones cascaded down upon us. No source. They just came out of a spot in the sky, pelting the jeep. Joaquin tucked his head in under folded arms and cried, "What's happening?"

I shrugged. It meant Hadman was still here, and nearby. What was it she said about natural laws, they all added up to a lot of hogwash, unwarranted intuitive assumptions or some such thing? So she could hurl stones at us out of the sky and, actually, in-

explicable rains of stones are more common than you might think. I'd seen an article in a Sunday supplement once, I'd—a couple of big rocks pelting uncomfortably close broke my reverie!

The important fact remained: something had detained Hadman. She had not yet left the Earth, and now that we approached, she set up her defenses.

OFF TO THE left of where we had parked the jeep, a wooded glen marched its silent trees right up to the roadside. It could be in there.

We plunged in, and I beat a path for us with the rifle.

No more stones, the trees would stop them. But Hadman would have something else waiting, she wouldn't give it up as a poor job just like that. We found out soon enough, because when I turned to see if Joaquin were following, I had to pull him down out of the foliage by his ankles. Hadman's anti-gravity trick again, only this time it wasn't funny.

Joaquin yelped, then floated away again. And abruptly, I felt incredibly light. I tried to keep my footing, but it was like attempting to remain on the bottom of the Great Salt Lake. It couldn't be done, and I floated up to join Joaquin.

"My God," he mumbled. Then, over and over, "My God."

Experimentally, I grasped a branch and, using it as a fulcrum, swung myself along. "Like a monkey." I panted. "Swing along like an ape, Enrico. It's the only way."

We swung and we made progress, and Hadman must have known. Weight returned without warning, and we plummeted to the ground, the lower branches breaking our fall. Joaquin hobbled after me. "My ankle," he muttered. "I hurt my ankle. Not

me, no! That witch hurt it."

Then it began to rain. From a scientific standpoint, that was the least of Hadman's miracles, because with her defiance of the laws which science holds as sacred she had brought the militia to Merryville, while we of Earth are coming pretty close to controlling rainstorms right now by seeding the clouds with carbon dioxide.

But Hadman needed no elaborate seeding process. It merely rained—great driving sheets of rain pouring down on us, drenching the rich foliage, turning the ground into a sponge which sucked at our ankles, beating our clothing into a sodden ruin, half-blinding us. Spears of lightning stalked us in Hadman's grim game, and once a huge tree not a dozen feet away was rent asunder by a vivid flash.

"It's fantastic!" Joaquin roared over the storm. "Impossible!"

"No. No, it's not. Call it super-science, Enrico, used ruthlessly. Call it—hell, what's the difference?"

Something gleamed close at hand, something big and sleek. Two things really, one small, the other large.

The first was Hadman's automobile, brought in through a clearing on the other side of the woods. The second—an elongated tear-drop, half a hundred feet from nose to tail, metallic, glistening—Hadman's scout ship!

Acrid fumes made us cough, made our eyes tear. Hell-fires flashed and roared at the tail of the ship, belching out in tempo with a booming noise which struck outrageously at our eardrums. Meaninglessly, I raised the rifle to my shoulder and fired. The bullet ricocheted off the ship's hull with a metallic pang.

"Why don't you throw pebbles?" Joaquin scoffed as he hobbled after me.

We worked our way around to the

nose of the ship. Momentarily I expected some more of Hadman's magic, but when none came I realized that perhaps the sphere of influence for such things was not so local that it would fail to snare Hadman as well. I smiled grimly. She'd have to meet us at our own terms.

A PORT yawned invitingly on the other side of the ship, and I pulled Joaquin back among the trees. "Wait," I said. "it might be a trap."

"So what? If we just stand here, she'll take off. The backlash from those jets will probably kill us anyway." It was a good point.

At that moment, angry voices floated out from the port—first Angus, then Hadman, shouting. Silence.

I almost jumped out of my shoes when a shot reverberated dully, and then someone came staggering out of the port. Angus. He walked three or four steps, erratically. He fell on his back. The front of his shirt where his hands clutched feebly was all red.

"She—wouldn't—take me," he moaned. "She was—playing with me. She—didn't want—me." He sobbed, and red flecked his lips. The last thing he uttered was, "I'll never see... Hadman again!"

I checked a wild impulse to fire a volley into the port. Laura was in there somewhere....

Joaquin ran forward, stumbling crookedly on his bad ankle, crossing Angus' corpse without looking at it. I tried to call him back, I screamed for him to stop. He'd run to his slaughter....

He didn't hear, and briefly I saw Hadman silhouetted in the port, the smoking .45 in her hand. She fired—once, twice, again.

Joaquin's body jerked convulsively with each impact, but he lumbered forward. "Witch," he was crying, "witch,

witch, witch. That's what you are."

The port started to slide shut as Joaquin reached it. He pitched forward, broken and bloody, falling into the breech, blocking it with his body.

I darted toward the ship, twisting, turning, spinning in the face of Hadman's fire. Something whizzed by my cheek. Something else burned fiercely in my shoulder, throwing me up and back like a giant hand. Then, no more shooting. Hadman crouched, pushing at Joaquin, trying to clear him from the port, sobbing now. Sobbing, for the first time, because Joaquin was wedged there, and I staggered toward them, holding the rifle in my hands but forgetting about it.

My left arm was numb, my shirt wet with a growing stain of red. Joaquin still lived. Lived a moment more! He said softly through the rain, "I died nobly, didn't I, Paul? What did my life of vice matter? What did it matter, if once, at the... last moment I struck a blow for... God?"

I stepped over him as he died, and Hadman, her composure an old cloak which she had discarded hurled the empty .45 at me, screaming. It struck my injured shoulder, sent lances of pain coursing through the arm which a moment before had felt nothing. I dropped the rifle and reached out with my good hand, entwining it in Hadman's wine-red hair and pulling her face so close that I could have rubbed noses with her.

"You'll take this ship to Diuniun now," I said. "If you don't, I'll kill you."

Hadman looked at me, a quick darting glance which plunged deep inside my brain and read my mind. She moved listlessly toward the controls as I retrieved my rifle.

Laura was bound tightly to a stanchion, smiling serenely. "We had engine trouble and we couldn't take off

for a time," she said, laughing hysterically.

DIUNIUN'S purple face stared at me soberly. "You win, Paul Reardon, and I am glad. You may take the congratulations of a tired, petulant Overlord back to your Earth with you. We'll return to our far home across the Galaxy, where we have learned to live—"

"Where?" I said. "What star?"

Little purple shoulders shrugged. "You haven't named it. Your largest telescopes haven't discovered it. But someday perhaps your progeny will come out and visit with us, eh?"

"Where's Hadman?" Laura wanted to know.

For answer, Diuniun pointed to the viewport. Briefly, something flashed away from the spaceship, not toward the shining globe of Earth, but away from it, into the bleak darkness of space.

"Hadman?" I asked. I didn't have to.

"Hadman. She coveted too much, far too much for either human or Overlord. She lost. She could not be humble again, so she took her ship on one last flight. You would not know it, Reardon, but there is a vast, chaotic, wild freedom out there. Hadman has fuel for perhaps a hundred million miles. She wants all space as her casket."

"No," I told him. "You're wrong. Look now." The tiny midget of a scoutship turned once and then passed over us, rocketing in toward the great fiery orb that was the sun. Diuniun was right and he was wrong. Hadman had lost and she could face it only in death. But she didn't want interstellar space for a casket, she wanted the sun for a funeral pyre.

"About your wound," Diuniun was saying. "Come with me." I felt weak

and my arm was stiff, but it had stopped bleeding. He led me to a high-vaulted room with bank upon bank of machinery standing against its walls in orderly rows. He eased me down on a low pallet, passed something over my face. I grew sleepy...

When I awoke, my arm was sound. A white scar alone remained where the bullet had done its damage, a scar which looked half a dozen years old. Impossible science of the Overlords. Yes, someday we would reach out to them, out to the stars, to share their wisdom. But we weren't yet ready.

"Potentially," Diuniun said, "you have a good world, Reardon. There is a lot of ugliness, there is corruption where a false ideology holds half Earth's people in thrall. But it will pass: I, Diuniun, say it will pass, if your people can fight it wisely.

"Now," he grinned, "take your woman and go." From someplace off in a far corner of the room, the black cloud pulsed toward us, engulfed us, became a polished globe. I heard Diuniun's voice, from far away, "Don't forget, I gave you an extra ten

days. The sun will dip back in its path, the ten days will be forgotten by Earth, Reardon. Everyone will forget. Only you will remember the month that had forty days..."

The globe took us to Earth, dissolved, became the black cloud, became nothing...

WE STOOD on Main Street in Merryville. Laura seemed very surprised to see me. "I—I know you," she said. "You're Paul Reardon." She smiled. "Are you still sticking to that wild story, Hercules?"

I smiled back at her. "No," I said. "Forget it. You're right. It was just a line, but now that you've nibbled, I can throw it away. You know what we're going to do, Laura?"

"What?"

"We're going to paint this town red. And then you know what?"

"What?"

"We're going to fall in love."

She started to laugh. "My gosh, you're funny." She tucked her arm in under mine as I hailed a cab.

"Want to bet?" I asked her.

THE END



THE CHARMS of music appeal to most all—the savage, the cultured, even to many of the lower animals. According to the physicists, music is a mode of motion. The sound—the raw material from which music is fashioned—is produced by motion, and it is a modification by art of aerial vibrations. These vibrations, such as are audible to the human ear, have a rapidity which ranges from 16 to 36,500 per second. As a comparison, so that you can see how slow sound vibrations actually are—heat vibrations begin at 134 trillion per second; light vibrations, visible to the naked eye, begin at 483 trillion per second. Many others are so great, they are beyond our sense perceptions.

These vibrations are governed by mathematical laws—the number of vibrations of strings is inversely proportional to their length; they are in inverse ratio to their diameter; they are inversely proportional

to the square root of their density.

According to Beauquier, "Musical vibration is only one particular mode of perceiving the universal vibration. Musical art is the art of sensibility *par excellence*, since it regulates the great phenomenon of vibration into which all external perceptions resolve themselves and transfers it from the region of the unconscious, in which it was hidden, to that of consciousness."

Music is a combination of sounds blended in harmony. Its origin lies in the action of Nature. It is man's attempt to gather all the sounds of Nature and to regulate and control them. The singing of the birds; the sound of the wind through the tree tops; the humming of the bees and the chirping of the crickets; the sounds made by frogs, streams, waterfalls: all these are the elemental forms of music. His humming, whistling, and chanting, were undoubtedly early man's first attempt to imitate these sounds.

THE PERFECT HIDEOUT

As a crook, Jake knew all about serving time. Now, with Professor Mathews' new invention, he would make Time serve him!



By Gerald Vanco

Sure, you could escape into the time machine all right. But where would it take you?



“BUT JAKE! Ain’t that a little risky, killing both guards?”
 “Keep your voice down, Joe,” Jake said, glancing around the crowded dining room. “Sure it’ll be risky, but both of those guards will be able to identify us if we don’t. Me especially. I’ve spent six months using my safety deposit box two, three times

a week so they’d get used to me. So’ve Lefty, Art, and Breezy.”

“Well,” Joe said, more subdued, “just so we don’t get caught. I’ve got my part down pat.”

“We depend on that, Joe,” Jake said ominously. “It would be too bad if those thermite slugs you’ve perfected didn’t open most of the boxes.”

"They will," Joe growled. "I've practiced out on the same kind of locks. You've seen the thermite slugs with their magnesium wire imbedded in them. Slip one in the lock, light the wire, and in twenty seconds the lock melts out completely, leaving the thing ready to pull out. Once we get started I can put them in one a second, while your boys go along behind and light them. We can get a hundred or more boxes open and emptied into the suitcases and scam before fifteen minutes is up."

"OK, OK," Jake said. "Shut up a minute. I want to listen to what this guy at the next table is saying."

Joe turned to look at the man Jake surreptitiously pointed at. He was a wispy sort of man, in his late fifties, thin-faced and with a high forehead. His companion was a man of stocky build who looked the part of a hard-headed business man.

"Granting you have what you claim, Professor Mathews," the stocky man was saying, "I can't quite see the practical applications even if it were perfected. You see, if I put up X dollars it will be an investment, and right away I want to see how I can get it back eventually, with interest in proportion to the risk."

"I do have what I claim, Mr. Arnold," the slightly built Professor Mathews said. "As for practical applications, time travel has more potentialities than you might think."

"But how do you know you can build a machine big enough to carry human beings to the future?" Arnold said. "You have a small experimental model. That's all."

"I'd like you to see it demonstrated," Mathews said.

"No, I'm afraid I'm not interested," Arnold said. "We're just wasting each other's time. When you get a full-sized machine, I could consider the

feasibility of manufacturing it. Come to me then."

"Then," Mathews showed restrained anger, "will be too late. I must have financial help to build the large time travel machine. That financial help will have a major interest in it, and will want to cash in on the risk it took and you didn't. Good day."

PROFESSOR MATHEWS rose from the table and started toward the front of the restaurant.

"Come on, Joe," Jake muttered. "We don't want to lose him. I've got an idea we can use the professor."

"I'm way ahead of you, Jake," Joe said.

The two men followed the professor, catching up with him out on the sidewalk.

"Pardon me, Professor Mathews," Jake said. "We were sitting at the table next to yours inside and couldn't help overhearing."

"Yes?"

"Allow me to introduce myself, professor," Jake said. "I'm Jacob Wainwright, the industrialist, and this is one of my associates, Joseph Brian. To come straight to the point, we would like to see a demonstration of your experimental model, and are prepared to back you to the hilt if it works. We have made our fortunes by taking chances. Haven't we, Joseph?"

"You're damn—I mean you're quite right, Jacob," Joe said. "Taking chances is—"

"My car is right here at the curb," Jake said, pointing to the spotless new Cadillac sedan nearby. "Would you..."

"This is certainly a stroke of luck for me," Mathews' antagonism was being replaced by an almost pathetic delight. "Of course I'll be glad to show you. My laboratory-home is at 108th and North Streets."

The three men got into the sleek sedan and floated luxuriously by the most direct route to the professor's laboratory. Jake and Joe looked at the place with great satisfaction. It was a tenement neighborhood where no one would ever notice anything that went on. Professor Mathews' place was a one-story store front building with curtains over the display windows, plus opaque white paint part way up to secure privacy.

Mathews unlocked the door.

"Step right in, gentlemen," he said happily. "I live in this front part. My workshop is in the back."

Jake and Joe noted with satisfaction that the living quarters showed no signs of a woman's touch, and the single cot was mute evidence that the professor lived alone.

THE PROFESSOR crossed the store space and unlocked another door, opening it to reveal a large room whose spotlessness was in sharp contrast to the living quarters.

The two men went in, staring with wide eyes and growing interest at the array of large motors and gleaming copper bussbars. After a hasty survey, their eyes settled on the metal sphere resting on a concrete base in the exact center of the large room.

"This is it," Mathews said proudly, walking over to it and patting it affectionately. "My experimental model."

"Looks good," Jake said. "Let's see it work."

"Yeah, let's see it work," Joe said.

"How much time do you have, gentlemen?" Mathews said. "It will take time, even for a limited demonstration."

"How much time?" Jake asked.

"Fifteen minutes," Mathews said. Then, as Jake and Joe nodded, "What I propose to do is place a golf ball inside the machine, send it forward fifteen minutes, and eject it, then

have the machine return here. What you will see will be the proof. You will see me place the ball inside the sphere, then open the door to show you the golfball is gone. I will then move the time sphere to one side, and fifteen minutes from now you will see a shadowy form of the time sphere appear, and the very solid ball materialize from that shadow."

"Sounds convincing to me," Joe said, looking toward Jake for agreement. Jake nodded and took out a cigar, biting off the end and clamping his teeth into it.

Mathews went to a drawer in a bench and took out a golfball and handed it to Jake. "Would you like to initial it or make some mark on it so you can be sure it's the same ball?" he asked.

"Sure," Jake said. He scratched a large J on it with his fountain pen and handed it back.

He lit his cigar and watched while the professor opened the front of the metal sphere and placed the ball in a small cup attached to a series of levers.

"When it reaches the point in the future I set it for," he explained, "the time mechanism will open the door and throw out the ball. Then the door will close again and the time sphere will return to the present instant, so that it will seem not to have been gone at all."

WHILE JAKE and Joe watched with sharp eyes he closed the door and pushed in a large knife switch on a large panel nearby. Pointers on glistening white meter dials moved. The low humming of powerful forces could be felt and heard. A pulsating aura of blue light surrounded the metal sphere for an instant.

Then the professor pulled the switch, went to the sphere and opened

the door. The golf ball was gone.

"See?" he said. "Now I must lift the sphere out of the way."

He wheeled a portable cart with a metal arm in place and lifted the time sphere off its concrete base, then wheeled it to one side of the room.

Jake and Joe looked curiously at the oval depression in the concrete where the time sphere had been. There were five metallic areas flush with the contour of the concrete.

"Those are the contacts through which the power enters the sphere," Professor Mathews explained. "Once it's started it needs no power."

Jake and Joe wandered about the laboratory staring at the many pieces of equipment in an obvious effort to make the time pass more swiftly. Every few seconds they glanced at their expensive wristwatches.

At last only a minute or two remained before the golfball was supposed to emerge from thin air. The three men stood in front of the concrete base, waiting.

Abruptly there was a blurred change above the concrete base. It became a definite sphere, shadowy and completely transparent to the things behind it. Inside this sphere could be seen the shadowy golfball as the dusky form of the small door in the sphere swung open.

Then, producing a mental *ping*, the shadowy golfball was thrown by the equally shadowy metal arm, and became a very real and solid golfball that bounced off the floor several times before settling down.

Professor Mathews bent down and picked it up. He handed it to Jake.

"Is that the same ball?" he asked.

Jake took it cautiously, turned it around until he saw the inked J.

"Yeah," he grunted. "You've made your point, professor." He blinked owlishly at the scientist for a moment.

"How much do you think it would cost

to build one of these machines big enough to carry half a dozen men?" he asked. "And how long would it take?"

"Around fifteen thousand dollars," Mathews said, "and about five weeks."

"I'll have the money for you in the morning," Jake said.

LEFTY, ART and Breezy came into the hotel room together.

"What's up, boss?" Breezy asked.

"Pour yourself a drink and relax," Jake said. "We've got a change in plans. Joe and I ran into a guy—a scientist—who's got a time machine we're going to use with the bank job."

"You mean we're going to blow the bank up?" Lefty asked.

"Pour yourself a drink and shut up for a minute," Jake said. "It isn't a time bomb. It's a time machine."

"You don't mean a clock, do you?" Breezy wisecracked.

"It's the perfect getaway," Jake said, ignoring the remark. "There's a statute of limitations on crimes that don't have murder in them, and even with murder you stand a better chance if any witnesses happen to have died of old age before they catch up with you. Right?"

"Sure," Breezy said, "but what's that got to do with it?"

"Simply this," Jake said importantly. "This scientist has invented a machine that can take us into the future, maybe a whole century. We can pull our job-hop into the machine and bingo, we're in the future where they can't do anything about it."

"I don't get it," Lefty said, bewildered.

"Tell him what we saw," Joe suggested. "Then he'll get it."

Carefully, Jake told everything. When he finished, Lefty, Art, and Breezy were wide-eyed with understanding.

"Christ!" Art said. "This is the best

thing yet. As soon as we pull the job, I can get a 2051 Cadillac instead of these crummy 1951 models!"

"Yeah?" Lefty said. "How do we know they'll still be making cars? They might be in another war by then I don't know whether I like it or not. They might even have prohibition again."

"Nah," Breezy said. "How can the Republicans ever get back in? And as long as the Democrats are in—"

"Well," Jake interrupted, "we can settle that when we get there. If we don't like the setup in 2051 we can get back in the time machine and try some other election year. That's the beauty of it."

"Okay, okay," Breezy said, "but what I want to know is, is this scientist just going to hand his machine over to us?"

"That's the hitch," Jake said. "We've got to raise fifteen gees by tomorrow morning to finance the building of the full scale machine. Then it'll take about five weeks for him to build it. He lives alone. We can bump him or take him with us when the time comes. I'm for taking him with us unless he gets high and mighty. But until he finishes the machine, we've got to be respectable business men so far as he's concerned."

"Fifteen gees!" Breezy exclaimed. "We haven't got that much!"

"I know," Jake said. He grinned suddenly. "But I've got an idea. It's justice in a way. When we first saw the professor he was trying to sell his idea to a guy named Arnold. I think it was that bigshot that owns a slice of the bank, as well as a dozen other things around town. I've been thinking we could get it from him."

"Just like that!" Breezy said. "Should we call him up now, or don't you want to wake him up?"

Jake turned to Joe. "How about that thermite stuff? He probably has

a safe in his home, and it probably has fifteen gees in it all the time...."

THE GIRL unlocked the door with a key from her purse. Inside, she frowned at the carelessly made bed, the signs of a skimpy breakfast. She hesitated with the half intention of at least washing the dishes, then glanced at her wristwatch and hurried across the room to the second door and opened it.

Professor Mathews looked up, then smiled broadly. "I'm glad you dropped in before work, Doris," he said. "Now I can tell you the good news. I've found a backer who'll finance the big machine."

"Congratulations, dad," she said, her face lighting up. "I'll call Dave as soon as I get to the office and tell him. Was it Mr. Arnold?"

"No," Mathews said disgustedly. "But it was indirectly through him. I guess I lost my temper. Two businessmen sitting at the next table couldn't help overhearing, and they followed me when I left him."

"Oh," Doris said. "By the way, I was reading the paper on the way over. The home of a Mr. Arnold was broken into and robbed early this morning. It may not be the same Mr. Arnold though. A safe was opened and twenty-five thousand dollars taken."

"It's probably not the same Mr. Arnold," Mathews said. "He'd be too cautious to trust a safe in his own house." He grinned. "Tell Dave to drop over this evening. I'll have enough money to pay him for helping me build the big machine. And when it's completed we'll all be rich. You two can get married then."

"Don't talk to me!" Doris said. "Talk to Dave. He's the one who thinks he has to have everything before marriage."

She planted a kiss on her father's cheek and hurried out. Professor Mat-

hews went back to his task of listing the materials he intended ordering just as soon as he received the fifteen thousand dollars.

Two hours later his new associates arrived.

"Well," Jake said when they reached the back room, "we got the dough. That is, we withdrew it when the bank opened this morning."

"Excellent," the old professor said. "I must say I enjoy having as partners men of courage and daring. And now, if you have the papers ready, I'll sign them."

"What papers?" Jake asked suspiciously.

"The partnership papers, of course!" Mathews said.

"Oh," Jake said. He and Joe sighed with relief. "As a matter of fact, no. We trust you. Don't we, Joe?"

"I'm sure I will never violate your trust," Mathews said, deeply moved. "However, we should at least have a verbal agreement. I would like you gentlemen to have at least a half interest in the invention."

"**A**NYTHING YOU say, professor," Joe said. "We'll leave it up to the goodness of your heart. The main thing is, how soon can you finish the full-size machine?"

"As I said before, five weeks," Mathews said. "When it's completed we can start actual time travel experiments."

"What do you mean, experiments?" Jake asked quickly. "It'll work, won't it?"

"Of course it works," Mathews said. "On a full-size machine, however, there may be slightly different technical problems. So far, I haven't made any attempt to see what effect traveling in time would have on anything alive."

"But it's got to do that!" Joe said. "We've got to know. Is there any way

of finding out right now?"

"There is, of course," Mathews said. "We could use a white rat or a rabbit...."

"Go out and get a white rat or a rabbit, Joseph," Jake said. "I'll stay here."

"While he's gone I'll fix the experimental model so it will make the animal leap out at the right time," Mathews said, suddenly worried.

But almost an hour later the slightly startled white rabbit leaped from the shadowy form of the time travel machine onto the table apparently no worse for its experience.

"After all," Mathews protested, "the value of the machine isn't dependent on whether it will carry living forms. There's a fortune to be made on other applications."

"Okay, okay," Jake said. "We won't argue the point. Here's the fifteen thousand dollars. We'll drop in from time to time to make sure everything's going good. If you need more dough, we'll get it for you."

DAVE CRANE got off the bus at the corner half a block from Professor Mathews' place. He saw two men come out and get into the gleaming sedan and drive away.

A moment later he was entering the workshop.

"Hi, pop," he said gayly. "Doris called me. I quit my job and here I am, ready for work."

"And here's the money," Mathews said, ruffling the two-inch-thick bundle of currency. "I'm glad you're here, Dave. I was a little afraid with so much money around."

"I'll go down to the bank with you and you can open a checking account," Dave said. "Who were those men I saw leaving? They looked sort of familiar."

"Jacob Wainwright and Joseph Brian," Mathews said. "Two big busi-

nessmen."

"Oh," Dave said. "Come on and let's bank the money. It's making me nervous too, having that much loose."

"You're going to get a salary, Dave," Mathews told him. "Two hundred a week. I asked my associates about it and they agreed that would be a legitimate expense." He turned away hastily to hide his expression. He hadn't mentioned any such thing to them, but with the salary Dave would get, maybe Dave would feel rich enough to ask Doris to marry him even if the time machine didn't work out to the point where it would bring in a fortune.

"Two hundred a week?" Dave was echoing. "I'm not worth it, Professor Mathews. It's—it's almost dishonest."

"Nonsense," Mathews said gruffly, shrugging into his coat. "Let's go, and after we deposit the money we can spend the rest of the day buying the things we'll have to have."

"WELL, SERGEANT," Mr. Arnold said impatiently, "it's almost noon. The burglary of my home is getting older every hour. Have you made any progress yet?"

"I'm a lieutenant. Lt. Dickson," the patient, sandy-complexioned man said. "These things take time and the police department doesn't guarantee anything except doing its duty as best it can. Thanks to your keeping a record of the serial numbers of the larger denomination bills, we stand a good chance of recovering the money. All the banks in town have been notified. Before the afternoon is over all the nightspots will have that list too."

"Then you should have the criminals apprehended before the day is over," Arnold said.

"I wouldn't pin my hopes too high if I were you," Dickson warned. "Whoever opened your safe is an ex-

pert with thermite, and that's quite rare. He or they will be cautious about the big bills. There's a strong chance you won't ever see your money again."

"Nonsense!" Mr. Arnold said sharply. "Expert criminals are always known to the police. Why don't you arrest all known criminals in the city and get to the root of the thing at once?"

Lt. Dickson shook his head.

"Then all I have to say is, if you fail I'm going to go after a cleanup of the police department," Arnold said coldly. "It's a deplorable state of affairs when an honest man can be robbed in the dead of night and the police department protects the criminals at large in our city at the risk of letting the culprit escape."

"I can understand how you feel," Dickson said sympathetically. "I'd get excited over losing twenty-five thousand dollars myself. By the way, have you thought over what I asked you earlier this morning? Do you know of anyone who knew you had that much at home? Any enemies or hard-up friends?"

"No. No, I haven't been able to think of anyone," Arnold said. "And besides, they wouldn't be expert criminals. I don't associate with that type in my business."

"All right, Mr. Arnold," Dickson said, standing up. "I'll call you if we get anything."

"Be sure you do, Sergeant," Arnold said, holding out a stocky hand across his desk without rising.

"Lieutenant," Dickson murmured.

"YOU'RE WANTED on the phone, Mr. Arnold," the pretty receptionist called.

Arnold, his hand on the knob of the hall door, looked back. "Tell whoever it is I'm out to lunch," he said. "I'll

be back in an hour."

"It's Lt. Dickson."

"Oh. Well, in that case... I'll take it in my office."

Arnold hurried back into his private office and closed the door.

"Yes?" he said into the phone.

"We've located fifteen thousand dollars of your money," Dickson's voice sounded. "Also the man who had it."

"Good!" Arnold said. "How'd you do it?"

"A man by the name of George A. Mathews deposited it in his personal checking account this morning about an hour ago. The teller didn't bother to look at the bills at the time because—"

"Mathews?" Arnold said, his eyes widening. "That explains it. Have you arrested him yet?"

"Not yet. We have a patrol car over at his place, but he isn't there."

"Hmmm," Arnold hesitated a moment. Then, "Would you do me a favor, Sergeant?"

"Not unless you stop calling me Sergeant," Dickson said with a dry chuckle.

"I meant Lieutenant," Arnold said irritably. "How can I keep unimportant titles straight in my mind when I have more vital things to think about? This is what I want to know. If I withheld charges against this man Mathews for the present, could I have him arrested later on? Say, in a few weeks?"

"You could," Dickson said, "but I can't see the object of it."

"You definitely have the evidence, don't you, so that this charge of burglary or whatever it is will hold if I decided to have him arrested in a month or two?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then call off your men, sergeant. Don't arrest Mathews. But be prepared to arrest him and get a con-

viction the moment I give the word."

"I don't like it," Dickson growled. "It's your money though. One thing, you'd better go to the bank and straighten out with them about that money. The way things are now they'll have to cancel the deposit and hand the money over to the police department."

"I'll do that," Arnold said. "As soon as I hang up I'll get in touch with my lawyer and we'll go over together and make sure we don't do any damage to the case."

When he hung up, he rubbed his hands together gleefully. "This is perfect," he muttered. "If Mathews has something, I can take the whole thing because he built it with my money which he stole after I refused to do business with him. If he doesn't have anything, I can have him arrested and get most of my money back."

LEFTY, JOE, Art and Breezy sprawled around the table playing four-handed poker. They had been doing it for hours, and looked it.

"Wish Jake would get back," Breezy said, raking in the small pot he had just won on a pair of queens.

"Wish you'd shut up," Lefty growled. "I get tired of the sound of your voice."

The budding quarrel was forgotten as the door opened and Jake came in, chewing contentedly on a cigar. The poker game was forgotten in mid-deal.

"Looks like the old galoot'll have it done tomorrow," Jake said. "I had to wait around until his helper left. Mathews wants me to meet the kid, but I have a feeling the kid would get suspicious. He looks intelligent."

He looked down at the four men and chuckled.

"I found out something else, too," he went on. "I parked my car around on the other street and sneaked down the alley and peeked in like I've been

doing, to make sure Mathews was alone. Then I saw someone enter the alley, so I ducked behind a pole and watched. This guy did what I had just done. Went up and peeked in the window of Mathews' workshop."

Jake took his cigar out of his mouth and elaborately broke the ash off into an ashtray. "It was Arnold, the guy who refused to do business with Mathews."

"The guy we swiped the dough from?" Breezy exclaimed. "Say! He might gum things up."

"Not from what I heard," Jake said with satisfaction. "He went back down the alley rubbing his hands together and muttering how rich he would be when Mathews finished the time machine and had him arrested for stealing his money."

"Stealing his money?" Breezy echoed.

"THE WAY I figure it," Jake explained, "Mathews deposited that dough we gave him in the bank. And Arnold had a record of the numbers. He figured that Mathews had robbed his safe when he wouldn't advance the money legally. So then he called off the cops and waited. He saw where he could get his money back and the time machine too if he waited."

"The crook!"

"We can take care of him," Jake said. "After that kid Dave left with some dame that called for him there, I went around to the front and went in. Mathews said the power company had been there today and put in the extra lines to carry all the power, it'll take. He already has the large size motors hooked up and ready to go. I made him promise that he wouldn't conduct the tests until we were there. He thinks all we want to do is watch. They're scheduled for tomorrow at eleven-thirty. He has to let the power

company know, so it won't blow out fuses somewhere at the power plant or something with all the juice it'll take."

"So we have to pull the job tomorrow morning," Joe said. "What if there's something keeps us from doing it?"

"There won't be," Jake said. "Tomorrow's Wednesday and that's the day the safety deposit department is always practically deserted. People that take their jewels out for weekend parties have put them back Monday or Tuesday. That goes for hoarders who put part of their paycheck in on Monday or Saturday."

"I'm ready with my part of the job," Joe said, glancing significantly at the briefcase against a wall.

"And we can make our getaway even without the professor," Jake gloated. "I had him explain just how to run the time machine so I could do it myself with my hands tied."

"Any change in plans at the bank?" Lefty asked.

"Why should there be?" Jake said. "If we don't kill the two guards, they'll know who we were."

"But what difference could that make in a hundred years?" Lefty objected.

"What difference could murder make in a century?" Jake grinned.

"The professor could build another machine, and they could get us and bring us back," Lefty said.

"Lefty," Jake said slowly, "you've just shown the one weakness of our whole plan. We'll take the professor with us—or bump him off. But I don't like that. He's doing us a real favor...."

THE BROAD marble stairway led down from the main floor of the bank to the safety deposit vaults. To the right of the foot of the stairs was a marble counter behind which lolled one of the two uniformed guards or

attendants. On the counter were three pads of printed blanks. Anyone who wished to get his deposit box had first to sign his name on one of the blanks so that the attendant could check the validity of the signature with the one on file. He would then place the signed blank in a stamp clock and register on it the time and date.

All this was familiar to Jake as he came leisurely down the marble stairs and calmly surveyed the tomb-like vault. He knew also that the other guard was on the other side of the thick bars that ran from floor to ceiling, blocking access to the interior of the actual vault, and that it was this second guard who had to unlock the heavy door of bars before anyone could get inside.

"Good morning, Mr. Wainwright," the first guard said politely.

"Good morning, Fred," Jake said, setting the suitcase down and signing the blank slip. He looked around with apparent preoccupation. "You don't look so busy this morning."

"As a matter of fact, we're not," the guard said. "You're our first customer." He tore off the slip Jake had signed and punched it in the stamp clock, then reached under the edge of the counter and pressed the buzzer that would signal okay to the other guard.

Jake picked up the suitcase and started toward the barred door, glancing from the corner of his eye to see Breezy coming down the stairs. When he reached the barred door the second guard was already unlocking it.

"Hello, Paul," Jake said calmly.

"Good morning, Mr. Wainwright," the guard said, swinging the door wide.

Jake stopped in the open doorway and turned his head. Breezy glanced at him. With deliberate calmness Jake turned his head back, drew out his gun in his shoulder harness with its compact silencer, and shot the guard.

The muffled plop from his gun was followed a split second later by one from the counter.

Already Joe had reached the foot of the stairs, and a few steps behind him Lefty and Art were coming down.

With well planned precision Joe entered the vaults and began sliding thermite slugs in each deposit box keyhole. The slugs had been pressed into form to exactly fit the locks, with a short stub of magnesium wire protruding.

Breezy left the desk where he had shot the first guard, and stood at the foot of the stairs ready to take care of any newcomer. Lefty and Art followed behind Joe and lit the magnesium stubs with well filled cigarette lighters. Jake stood back, alternately watching the progress of their operations and the vacant stairway.

Joe stopped putting in the thermite slugs and went back to the first boxes. Using a short offset screwdriver as a lever, he started each of the boxes free so that all that would be necessary would be to pull them out by hand and empty them into the suitcases.

Lefty and Art lit the last stub and began taking the boxes out and lifting off their covers to reveal their contents. Emptying each box on the floor, they sorted contents into three piles; money, jewelry, and papers.

Joe finished starting the boxes and joined them, beginning the job of filling the suitcases with money and jewelry.

In remarkably short time, the job was done and the suitcases were closed and locked.

"Okay," Jake said. "We go in the same order we came. And act natural." He turned sharp eyes to Breezy. "You destroy those slips?"

"Better than that," Breezy said. "They and the pads are in one of the suitcases."

"Okay," Jake said. He went to the

stairs, bracing himself as he walked so that the suitcase wouldn't appear to be heavy.

"DORIS, why don't you leave that mess alone?" Professor Mathews said pleadingly.

"Nothing doing, dad," Doris said grimly. "Your partners are going to be here at eleven or a little after, and I want the place looking respectable. Besides, I have to do something or go mad with impatience."

"You should have gone to work," Mathews groaned.

"That's unfair, pop," Dave said, grinning, "and you know it. She has a right to see the big demonstration. And after I ride in the machine to fifteen minutes in the future, if nothing happens, she has a right to demand the next trip."

"I wish you wouldn't," Doris said. "It might be dangerous. Wouldn't it be better to use an animal first and see what happens?"

"The machine will work just as perfectly as the small model," Dave said. "Now stop worrying, honey."

"Well, whether it works or not, Dave," Mathews said quickly, "you now have a thousand dollars more saved up, and—"

"You're darn right we're going to get married," Dave said, "only, maybe we'd better wait until we see how rich you get. I could never marry a rich girl." He frowned.

"Oh, damn!" Doris said angrily. "You'll be as rich as we will. Dad gave you a half interest in his half interest."

Dave shook his head. "That isn't so, and I couldn't take that after accepting a salary to work for him."

Doris opened her mouth, then closed it as a knock sounded at the front door. She stamped over and opened it, brushing a wisp of hair back with a wrist.

"May I come in?" the heavy-set man standing on the sidewalk asked politely.

"I don't know," Doris said. "What do you want? If you're a salesman—"

"Mr. Arnold!" Mathews exclaimed.

"What are you doing here? I thought you weren't interested in my work."

"You should ask such a question, Professor Mathews," Arnold said, a steely glint in his eyes as he walked past Doris into the room.

"This is the man who turned down my application for money," Mathews explained. "And you may as well learn right now I don't need it now, Mr. Arnold. My full-scale machine is completed and ready for its first tests. I have no need of your money."

"That is precisely why I'm here," Arnold said crisply. "To view the first test." He took a deep breath and added, "Of my time machine."

"Your time machine," Mathews exclaimed. "Are you insane? You have no interest in any part of it. You had your chance and you turned it down."

"Yes, I turned it down," Arnold said quietly, "so you came to my home in the dead of night and used your science to open my safe and steal the money."

DORIS and Dave turned to look at Mathews, who was staring at Arnold.

"You thought I didn't know, didn't you?" Arnold went on. "But unfortunately for you, I kept a list of the numbers of those bills, and when you deposited them in the bank the bank notified the police and they notified me. So you see, the machine is mine—unless you want to go the penitentiary and be branded a common thief."

"You can't say that!" Dave said, advancing upon Arnold grimly.

"Wait!" Mathews said. There was a thoughtful look on his face. "I don't believe he would come in here making

accusations like that unless he was convinced they were true. That means—"

"That your partners stole the money from him!" Doris said.

"This is terrible!" Mathews said. "And they'll be here almost any minute now. We must get the police."

"The police are entering this as a last resort," Arnold said sharply. "Regardless of who stole the money, it was my money and the proof is in the hands of the police. Unless you sign over the entire thing to me—and that only if this test proves the machine actually works—you are going to be arrested."

"I can't do that," Mathews said. "My partners own a half interest, and Dave here owns a quarter interest."

"I don't have any papers saying so," Dave said. "And if I did I'd tear them up rather than see you in trouble."

"The partners don't have any papers either," Mathews said hotly, "but an agreement is an agreement. I can't go back on it even to—to keep from going to jail."

"They have no papers?" Arnold breathed eagerly. "Then sign here." He took out a white rectangle of paper with typing on it. "Sign this and have these two people witness it, and you won't go to jail. That's all you have to do. Just sign. I'll take care of the rest."

Mathews took the paper and read it with troubled eyes.

"This gives you sole interest in the time travel machine," he said, his voice trembling.

"Don't sign it!" Dave said. Then, as Arnold held out a pen, "Damn it. I'll confess. I stole the money myself before I'll let this happen."

He grabbed the paper from Mathews and wadded it up.

"You young hippersnapper!"

Arnold's voice was like a whip-lash.

"And as for you!" Dave said. He accented the *you* with a swift explosive movement that caught the portly financier on the padded point of his jaw.

At that moment a knock sounded at the door.

"**Q**UICK!" Dave whispered. "You two lift up the edge of the cot and I'll roll this guy under out of sight. That's all we can do for now."

"I'll slip out and get the police as they come in," Doris whispered.

The knock came again, more insistent.

"Just a minute!" Mathews called.

The three gave one another encouraging but scared looks, then Mathews headed grimly for the door with Doris behind him ready to slip out.

"G'bye, dad," she said sweetly as he opened the door. She smiled pertly up at Jake and slipped past him and the other men and scurried toward the corner.

Jake looked after her hesitantly, then shrugged.

"Come in, Mr. Wainwright," Mathews said, his voice off key. He saw the four other men for the first time and lifted his eyebrows questioningly.

"Joseph Brian you know," Jake said, pushing past Mathews into the room. "The others are... associates."

Mathews had backed away to stand beside Dave. They looked at the men entering with their suitcases. Lefty, the last to enter, closed the door and twisted the nightlatch.

Jake glanced at his wristwatch. "Fifteen after eleven," he said. "I suppose the power is ready now?"

"It should be," Mathews said, then bit his lip.

"Why the suitcases?" Dave asked smoothly.

"We're going on a trip," Joe told him. "Let's go in and get this over

with."

He pushed open the door to the workshop and went in. The others followed, with Mathews and Dave finding themselves herded in behind Lefty and Breezy.

"So this is the Grand Central Limited!" Lefty said in awed tones as they looked at the huge metal sphere with its open door sitting on the concrete block in the middle of the lab, its topmost point just short of touching the roof. He started up the steps leading to the round opening.

"Wait a minute," Dave said. "I'm making the test trip."

"That's what you think," Lefty countered.

"Come on, professor," Jake said, "we're all going, including your helper."

"We're not going," Mathews said, "and you're not either. And what's more, I just learned that you stole that money you gave me."

Jake ignored him. "Watch them, Breezy, while I get in and set the dials."

Breezy had a gun out, with its snout waving between Dave and Mathews. Jake trotted up the steps and disappeared inside.

"But—" Mathews started to say.

"Shut up," Breezy said, bringing up a foot and shoving against his chest to send him sprawling across the room.

"Send up the suitcases," Jake ordered, appearing in the round opening of the time machine.

A loud pounding sounded from the front room.

"Open up in the name of the law!" a voice shouted.

"Cops!" Joe exploded. "Get going with those suitcases."

"Shoot the professor and his helper," Jake ordered from the opening.

Breezy brought his gun up to comply. There was a sound of running

feet and excited voices in the front room. Breezy hesitated, then decided escape was more worthwhile at the moment. He ran up the steps. At the top he started to turn to fire. Two uniformed policemen with drawn guns burst through the door. He ducked into the time machine. The door swung shut with a loud metallic thud.

"Quick, Dave," Mathews said from his position on the floor. "The motor generators!"

Dave sprang toward the control panel, but before he reached it the motors whined into a power surge, then quieted again.

"Too late," he said, turning back. "They've gone."

ARNOLD CAME into the room. "I must apologize, Professor Mathews," he said. "I recovered consciousness immediately after the criminals arrived and heard the whole thing. It was I who let the police in."

"So you know now I didn't steal your money," Mathews said.

"Yes." Arnold turned to Dave, rubbing his chin tenderly. "And I forgive you for striking me, young man," he said.

"Oh, dad! Are you all right?" Doris cried as she rushed in.

"Is there any way to open this door?" one of the policemen asked.

"I can open it from the outside control panel," Dave said. "But you won't find anyone in there. It's a time machine. Those men went into the future and left the sphere."

The two policemen looked at each other with lifted eyebrows.

"Go radio for more cars before we open the thing," one of them said.

"I'm really sorry, professor," Mr. Arnold said as they stood around waiting and staring at the blank exterior of the sphere of gleaming metal. "I should have realized."

"You were too busy thinking how

you could claim the whole thing if it worked," Dave said hotly. "The way I see it you aren't entitled to anything except maybe your fifteen thousand dollars—if that."

"And what do you have to say about it, young man?" Arnold asked coldly.

The policeman who had gone out returned just then.

"They'll send over four cars," he told his partner. "This is really hot. The bank was robbed half an hour ago and two guards killed. These men in the sphere answer the descriptions of the robbers."

"Those suitcases!" Doris gasped.

"Now I see why," Mathews said. "They've planned this all along. Mr. Wainwright and his associates saw how they could commit a crime and escape into the future. How far they've gone we won't know until the doors are opened and we see the setting of the controls."

Footsteps thundered in the front room. Men with portable machine guns came in, grimly ready for anything.

"They're inside that sphere," one of the two policemen said, "if they're anyplace here. Okay, Dave, open the door."

WHITEFACED, DAVE went to the control panel and pushed a black button. While everybody watched, the ponderous door opened wide. There was no movement from the gloomy interior.

"Come out with your hands up or we'll shoot!" one of the police said loudly.

"They're not there," Mathews said. "If you'll let me, I'd like to see the settings on the dials in there and find out just how far into the future they've gone."

"Not just yet, sir," one of the police said. "The rest of you be on the

ready. I'm going in and look around."

He went up the steps, ready at the slightest sign of movement to leap back. At the top he hesitated briefly, then entered. A moment later he reappeared.

"Get homicide and the coroner," he said. "And notify the chief that we've recovered the bank loot."

"What's in there?" Mathews asked. "Did something go wrong?"

The policeman came down the steps slowly, a grim smile on his lips.

"I don't know if anything went wrong sir," he said. "It will be up to the coroner to find out. By the way, the setting on the dial inside was for 2051."

"A hundred years!" Dave exclaimed. "We'll never catch them now!"

"No need to," the policeman said, a cryptic smile on his lips. "There were five of them? They're all in there, or what's left of them. Five skeletons and a lot of dust."

"Skeletons!" Mathews was visibly startled, Mr. Arnold dismayed.

Mathews was nodding absently. "That was the only thing left to find out," he said. "That was what Dave was going to determine on his first experimental trip of fifteen minutes into the future. Just how long it takes to make the trip."

He stared at the floor for a moment, then: "Five men inside that sphere without air-conditioning or food or water would naturally change them into dry bones and dust if—"

"Of course!" Dave said wonderingly. "Why didn't we think of that ourselves! They went a hundred years into the future—and it took them a hundred years to get there!"

"About that twenty-five thousand dollars," Mr. Arnold said, breaking the dramatic silence. "I'm willing—"

"Sue me," Professor Mathews said. He shrugged and turned his back on

the business man to beam happily at Doris who was slipping her hand in Dave's and whispering in his ear.

"You were wonderful when you hit that awful Mr. Arnold," she was saying...

THE END



MIND YOUR MANNERS!

By L. A. Burt

THE UNCULTIVATED products of the open plains and forests, plus the fish and animal life he was able to catch and kill, furnished the food in the early days of man's existence. Those living near the water ate clams, fish, oysters, and all other forms of aquatic life that they could acquire. If early man is compared to the lowest order of human life found today—as, for example, the Australian Bushman—then it would be reasonable to suppose that he also used worms and bugs as part of his diet.

As early as the late Palaeolithic Age, man had learned the art of making harpoons for spearing fish. Wild berries, grain, nuts, and the early forms of all our known fruits and vegetables were used for food.

The uncovered rubbish heaps of Mousterian man show that the bones of the large animals had nearly all been split or cracked, in order to secure the marrow. Whether this was a matter of necessity or taste, is not known. But the fact remains that early man must have been particularly fond of the marrow from the bones of animals.

Judging from the teeth of early Mousterian man, he ate the buds of trees and plants in much the same manner as do the

grass-eating animals of today. He had, of course, no knowledge of game preservation and protection, so the eggs of birds and waterfowl also furnished him with food. For countless unknown centuries, he ate the raw flesh of the animals he killed. The odor of decay was pleasing to his sense of smell, just as it is to the animals of today.

But from a period dating back about 25,000 years, there is evidence—in the form of the ashes of hearth fires and a cupped-out stone which is the beginning of the grease lamp—that early man had begun to cook his food, and to use the animal oil for lighting purposes. Undoubtedly, he rendered out and preserved the animal oils in order that his cave dwellings might be made more cheerful.

Many of the carvings on cavern walls which depict species of animals now extinct, could only have been drawn by artificial light. Man's mind had reached a restless stage. While he was hemmed in from the winter weather, he found relief in painting or carving pictures from memory. He little realized that he was leaving an invaluable history of his achievements that his progeny—25,000 or 50,000 years in the future—would study with fascination.

Finders Weepers!

By Dale Lord

IT HAS BEEN a standing joke among uranium prospectors that the Government's offer of ten thousand dollars for the discovery of rich deposits of uranium ore, is a hedging offer, in fact and deed. No one has claimed the reward successfully. Invariably the deposits found have always been "too dilute." Naturally, such an attitude on the part of bureaucracy isn't conducive to searching. Evidently the Government is recognizing this too, for it recently upped the ante to thirty-five thousand dollars!

Above all it is making plans to reward the discoverers of less concentrated deposits. The purpose of this is clear. We now buy most uranium ore from the Belgian Congo and from Canada—hardly any

is produced in the United States even though most of it is used here—and it is known that we have vast amounts of low-grade deposits which sooner or later we're going to have to work.

Uranium prospecting is a tedious, time-consuming task calling for surprising skill and a great investment in time and energy, including a sizeable outlay for equipment. It isn't simply a matter of watching the light flicker or hearing the phone clicking on a Geiger counter. Judgment is involved. We're now trying to get people to investigate the potential deposits with some hope of a concrete award instead of an abrupt dismissal. Eventually uranium may be worth its weight in gold, even if breeder atomic piles are devised!

THE SHIPS hung in the great dark-like clusters of silver coins flung on the black cloth of space. The suns of Galaxy Eighteen burned all around them, green and

pale white and candle-flame red. The space lanes were silent, empty of the thunder of rockets. The ships, nearly a thousand of them, hung steady, waiting. The vortex cannons were

As Matt laughed, Marco threw the half-filled wine glass at him in a surge of wild temper.



For a woman's love, these brothers bathed
entire galaxies in blood and destruction!



"OLD SPACEMEN NEVER DIE!"

By John W. Jakes

manned. On the bulging bow of each ship were huge letters outlined in the faint luminescent glow of the guide lights.

The letters spelled, *Sol, Incorporated.*

In the chartroom of the flagship *Caliban I*, Matthew Cain paced restlessly along the catwalk that ran just inside the wide observation window. He watched his fleet with narrow gray eyes, moving with lithe, easy steps that held just the faint suggestion of a swagger. His black hair was even more tangled than usual, left that way from the nervous movement of one of his muscular hands.

Below the catwalk, the astrogators sat at their high-slanting tables, smoking and talking quietly. The instrument banks before them were dead, the rows of tiny lights dark. Like the ships, the astrogators waited, there in the high-ceilinged room under the light of the big ceiling illumination units.

On the catwalk, Matthew stopped pacing. He turned quickly to an older man with thin gray hair, who stood leaning against the rail with an air of quiet precision. The back half of the small man's skull was a curved plate, shining with a dull metallic glint.

"Give me a cigarette," Cain said sharply.

The little man fished one out of his tunic pocket and handed it over. Light flashed from the metal left hand that served in place of a real one. "You nervous, Matt?" he asked.

Matt threw back his cloak. The bloody lining shimmered. He struck a match on his boot and put it to the cigarette. "You keep your mouth shut," he said thickly.

The little man shrugged. "All right. Only I was just thinking, what if, he doesn't come."

Smoke plumed from Matt's nostrils. His lips skinned back over his teeth

and he laughed. It was not pleasant to see. "He'll come all right. He knows better than to try and play games with me. After all, I was raised with him."

"He's your brother," the little man agreed, fiddling with his belt. "If he's like you, maybe he won't come...."

Matt was watching space again. "I told you to shut your mouth," he said, taking a long pull on the cigarette. "I told you...." His voice trailed off. One arm came up, pointing.

"There, by God," he breathed. "There!"

THE LITTLE man, whose name was Time, peered over Matt's shoulder. Above the ships, another fleet could be seen, plunging down toward them. The jets flamed in the blackness, and there was, a faint rumble, even within the flagship.

"He hasn't got more than two hundred ships," Matt said softly, watching the approaching fleet. "And they're tubs, all of them. Class eleven freighters, converted."

"Looks like he's got some vortex cannon rigged," Time commented, seeing the round openings along the sides of the ships.

"But we've got more!" Matt's eyes were eager and full of strange hunger. "I just hope he starts something. We'll blow those tin cans of his from here to the Yellow Frontier."

Quickly, Matt turned to the rail and began calling orders. The astrogators put out their cigarettes hastily.

"Sound alert for the cannoneers," Matt yelled. "Full stations. Boarding parties ready with the fliers. Complete armament. Alert the captains of all ships."

The astrogators flipped switches on the banks of machinery. The small lights began to go on and off like blinking eyes, while the men at the

slanting tables spoke orders into microphones.

Time caught Matt's arm. "I don't think you should go over there alone. He may want you to do just that."

Matt grinned. "If I'm not back in..." He glanced quickly at his wrist chron. "...thirty minutes, blow hell out of them. I'll be dead and it'll be too late to worry anyway."

"Matt, I wish you'd..."

The younger man flung off Time's hand. His voice grew hard. "You're in charge of this ship, Time. You're not in charge of me. If it wasn't for this command, you'd be getting your lungs eaten out in the dust mines. You'd be just another guy who got blown up and put back together with plastic and metal and wire. Remember that."

He turned away from Time, who licked his lips and stared at the floor. The photo cell in the wall at the end of the catwalk buzzed and the elevator door slid open. Matt stepped in. It clanged shut. The tube carried him down into the iron bowels of the ship.

Matt anticipated the meeting. His fingers ran up and down the hilt of the dress rapier. Dress, or not, it had a blade that was deadly. He laughed again, thinking how fine it would be if he could ram the blade through his brother's neck. But that would be too easy.

With a loud *spang*, the elevator door opened. Matt walked up a long narrow ramp, cloak flapping behind him. One of his officers, in a black cape and shock helmet, saluted.

"Where's the flier?" Matt asked.

"In the lock, sir."

"As soon as I'm out, beam their flagship. Tell them I'm on my way over."

"Right, sir." The officer vanished down another branch of the hallway.

Matt climbed through the small hatch of the cylindrical flier and used the automatic controls to close the in-

ner door. The outer lock opened, sliding to one side. He pulled the control bar and the flier made its coughing roar, rising into black space.

THE AIR in the flier cabin was cold, but Matt did not notice. He was too caught up in the coming meeting. Behind him, he felt the tremendous power of his fleet. *His* fleet. The thought was good.

Signal sirens were screaming on the ship ahead. Red beacons circled in the dark. They saw him coming.

He picked out the flagship easily. It was a big vessel, but its sides were caked and rotted with rust. Carefully steering the flier, he watched the other ships. They deployed in three circles, one on top of the other. In the center of the middle circle hung the flagship. On its bow, two letters were splashed in purple phosphorous paint, mockingly. *MC*.

The flier slid through the airless black, up through the bottom ring of ships and toward the flagship. The lock gaped, spilling light. Matt guided the flier inside, waited for air to return, and stepped out.

The inner door opened. A beefy man with a dirty uneven brown beard and tremendous arms stood pointing a blaster at Matt's belly. His lips made a tiny malicious pink pucker.

"I'm the first mate to Cap'n Cain," he rumbled.

"He's expecting me?" Matt asked with faint sarcasm.

"That's right," came the reply, and with heavier sarcasm, "*sir*."

They took an elevator upwards. When it came to a halt, the mate motioned him forward.

The room was fitted out as a lounge. There were thickly covered orchid divans, a heavy flowered rug from, Matt thought, Xenol in Galaxy Eleven, blond wood liquor cabinets. It showed a woman's hand, and a rather cheap

one at that.

The woman was there, too.

She sat on one corner of a divan, holding a liquor glass. She was a big woman, with long legs and a full body. Her gown hung open to her waist, exposing large deep breasts. She looked at Matt over her shoulder. Yellow hair tumbled down loosely. Her lips were parted, red and wet. She peered at him out of gray eyes, with the peculiar dreaminess of half-slumber.

"You look like you just got out of bed," Matt said.

"I did," she said, frowning.

"Where's Marco?"

"He'll be here."

Matt wrinkled his nose at the cloud of musky perfume around her. A sound tape played somewhere, weird minor themes interspersed with kettle-drums.

"I didn't know my brother went in for run-down mistresses," Matt said casually, sensing the dislike the woman felt for him.

She got up and walked to the liquor cabinet. She didn't look at him. A siphon hissed. "You are rotten, just like Marco told me," she said.

The mate jerked his shoulder. "Better watch out what you say to her. You aren't on your own ship now." The fat fingers had harsh, biting power as they gripped Matt's shoulder.

"Oh yes," he replied, "of course."

A door opened. Marco Cain walked in.

THEY STOOD looking at each other, the two men who had been born on Mars, back in Galaxy One of the Earthmen. They were a great deal alike, tall, well built, with Marco the heavier of the two. Both had black hair that was wild and tumbling.

Marco fixed himself a drink without saying anything. His uniform was a makeshift affair, the cloak patched and repaired in many places. He

moved much as Matt did, but with a more deliberate slowness. But there was one thing the two men shared perfectly.

Hate.

Marco weighed the glass in his hand. "I got your message on Black-rock. You advertised very well. Every dive in the Galaxy knew you wanted to see me, and where."

"I've still got connections," Matt replied.

"I came because I want to know just exactly what you want," Marco said, seating himself and putting his arm around the woman. "This is Arna."

Matt ignored the introduction. "And I want to know what you're doing in Galaxy Eighteen."

"Seeing the sights." Marco took a drink. Arna rubbed her shoulder against him, head back, eyes closed.

Matt stared at the wall for a minute. A flag hung there, a white piece of cloth, painted with the same purple phosphorous letters that burned on the outside of the ship. *M C*.

"Marco, don't waste time."

"I'm not." He took another drink, deliberately.

"Lay it on the line."

Marco studied him. "All right. I hate you the way a man hates the worst things in his life, Matt. But I want to give you a chance. I'll get a hell of a lot more pleasure out of finishing you that way."

"Go on."

Arna lit a cigarette, passed it to him. Smoke climbed to the ceiling in the dim-light. Matt kept one hand on his sword. The mate was unmoving, blaster on Matt's back.

"I was over in Galaxy Four for a while," Marco said. "Leading a mercenary army. Profitable. But I heard about you. Commander of the Sol Incorporated transport fleet in Galaxy Eighteen. Practically a dictator. How

did you get the post?"

"By slaughtering more brigands than the last commander."

Marco waved his hand. "There's the point. The next in line has to be tougher than the last. I'm going to wreck you, Matt. I'm going to wreck the Sol-Incorporated transport fleet until the big boys in Galaxy One crawl around and beg me to work for them, instead of fighting them. That way, I can relax." He looked at the woman. "We like relaxing, Arna and I."

She laughed softly, kissed him on the mouth, pressing against him.

"You're crazy, Marco," his brother said. "I found out what you want all right, but I know you can't win. You always want everything, just like you did when you were a kid. But this time you won't get it. You think you're such a goddamned big military man...."

Marco rose, face darkening. "Keep quiet, Matt."

"Look at you," Matt roared. "Look at you, in this rotten wreck of a ship, with a fleet of run-down ore freighters, and a worn-out woman and old clothes and....that."

HIS SWORD licked out before the mate could stop him. It rasped and tore through the flag on the wall, pulling it free. Matt let it hang on the point of his blade.

"Try and finish me, Marco. I wish you would."

He threw down the flag.

Marco held tightly onto his glass for a moment. Then his arm flashed backward and he threw it at Matt's head.

The mate jumped forward, clubbing at Matt with the blaster. Matt whirled, slicing downward with his blade. The mate screamed and the blaster dropped. The mate's sleeve began to darken with a long line of blood.

"I'm going back to my fleet and

blow your ships out of space," Matt whispered. "Sol Incorporated keeps war rockets for pirates like you." He ran toward the elevator. The mate stumbled after him.

"Let him go," Marco yelled. "Remember this, Matt. You're finished...."

His voice drifted in the elevator. The closing door cut it off. No one tried to stop Matt. He clambered into the flier, waited till the lock opened automatically, and sent it roaring out into space.

His eyes searched upward. His brother's fleet was regrouping. The rockets made wisps of flame in the night of space. The flier shot away from the ancient ships, toward the shining war rockets of the Sol Incorporated fleet.

The leaders back in Galaxy One would make Matt a Tri-galactic Commandant if he killed his brother. The thought was pleasant. But he couldn't help feeling just a bit shaken. Marco had been so damned confident.

He dialed the *Caliban I* on the flier beam set. The receiver buzzed and then the voice of the communications officer came in.

"Give me Time on the bridge," Matt ordered.

"Time, bridge," a voice said after a minute.

"Formation eight-three. Begin firing. Keep the *Caliban* back until I reach you. I want every one of Marco's ships out of the sky in an hour.

Time's voice was quiet as death. "They're already going."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Almost as if he could see Matt with his eyes on his own fleet, Time said, "Look behind you."

Matt jerked around. His jaw went slack and he gagged. Marco's ships were...disappearing.

"In God's name..." Matt choked.

The old ships were nearly all gone. Only about twenty remained. And those few were vanishing. Not jetting away...*vanishing*. There were no trails of fire in the black to mark their passing. There was only a filmy white aura springing up around each of them, a wavering as the line of the ships grew indistinct, and then space, sprawling with points of light where the ships had been.

Matt didn't talk. Until he had slammed the flier into the lock and run back to the chart room with fear gnawing great chunks out of his stomach, he didn't talk.

TIME STOOD in the middle of the chart room. The astrogators slumped listlessly over their tables, expectancy gone. There was nothing to fight any more.

"What happened to them?" Matt shouted.

Time pulled on his cigarette. "Don't you know?"

"Hell no. Those ships couldn't have faster-than-light drive. They're too old. Even we don't have it, and the Caliban's only been in service three years."

His voice echoed hollowly in the room. The astrogators watched him out of dispirited sunken pits of eyes.

Time blew out smoke. "Your brother's got teleportation."

Matt choked. "But...but that's illegal!"

"Not to men like Marco."

"Time, get a beam through to Venusburg, Galaxy One. Tell the Marshall that we've got to have a fleet of faster-than-lights right away."

"Check."

Matt's mind twisted and churned at the thought of the weapon his brother possessed. Instantaneous transportation to any point in the galaxy. Immeasurably dangerous...

One of the astrogators handed him a

portable com receiver.

"Message from Transport Base, Planet one hundred four, Argon, Yellow Frontier Sector. Unidentified fleet appeared. That's the exact wording, *appeared*. Element of surprise overcoming immediate defenses. Request assistance."

Matt threw down the phone. His hand was knotted into a fist.

"Direct flight," he shouted at Time. "Argon, Yellow Frontier. Marco must have teleported his fleet there after I left him. I want every bit of power you can squeeze out of the rockets."

Time ran toward the main com room. Matt climbed to the catwalk, stood looking out of the observation window. The astrogation tables began to flash and hum once more.

A powerful trembling roar filled the *Caliban I*. The stars began to move, wheel in the heavens. Deployed around the flagship, Matt could see the war rockets, plunging like silver bombs through the cold silent night of Galaxy Eighteen.

Matt calculated swiftly. Three parsecs. Fifty-seven and six tenths trillion miles. Almost twelve hours...

The rockets made thunder. Fire burned from the rear of the fleet as it hurtled on.

Matt stayed in the chart room, thinking about Marco's teleportation. Teleportation was dangerous because of the unknown warps in space, but Marco would take the chance... *goddam him*...

The ships plunged into the maze of planets and suns known as the Yellow Frontier exactly eleven hours later. One hour and fifteen minutes after that, the Caliban flashed down into the atmosphere of Argon while the remainder of the fleet hovered just outside the envelope of air.

Matt grew sick at his stomach. The great supply base, twenty miles on a

side, was a ruin. Gigantic craters gaped where the storage sheds and tool shops had been. Blood still bubbled on the warm ground. Thousands and thousands of dollars of equipment, gone. Several thousand men gone....

It was morning, near dawn. Matt had the ship set down. He walked about in the wreckage, smoking. His cloak whipped in the wind. The sky was beginning to grow gold in the south. There were pieces of bodies scattered over the burnt ground. Girders made skinny bent fingers against the dawn sky.

Someone groaned in the wreckage. A tube repair man, a blue Martian, lay pinned under the corner of a metal beam. He asked for Matt's cigarette. Matt held it down to his lips. Just as the Martian inhaled, the beam creaked and the corner pushed into his stomach. The blue flesh tore. Greasy ichor welled onto the ground. Matt turned away quickly.

He walked toward the *Caliban*, picking his way through the ruins. The wind seemed colder. He stood looking up into the gold sky, seeing beyond it, to where Galaxy Eighteen lay spread out with its millions of worlds.

"All right," he said softly, his hate a quiet and terrible thing, "we'll see who wins."

He walked quickly back to the ship in the wind.

CHAPTER II

THE TRAIL OF MARCO CAIN

THE *Caliban* I raised on her jets from the atmospheric envelope of Argon and rejoined the rest of the fleet. Matt went to his cabin and called for a meeting of all his captains. The fliers darted toward the flagship like angry insects and, presently, the

nine hundred or so officers sat restlessly in a small auditorium.

On the stage, Matt walked back and forth while he explained the situation. When he had finished, there was only a faint rustle of talk.

"We'll have to watch out," Matt told them. "I'm going to have Time, here, issue your orders. You'll be assigned in groups of three war rockets each to one of the main cargo lanes. We haven't any way of telling where my brother will strike next. I don't doubt that he'll try to stop some of our big shipments, and we'll have to be prepared. But that still leaves the basic problem unsolved."

Time got up from his chair, raising his left hand. It flashed metallically in the light: "What do you want?" Matt said hastily.

"Well," the little man replied quickly, "I think" something more ought to be done. I mean besides watching the space lanes. Your brother practically kicked our faces in the mud down on Argon."

A rolling angry growl came from the lips of the captains. It rose and echoed around the auditorium, full of throbbing hatred. Matt threw his head backward and laughed. His mouth twisted sarcastically. "So you thought I was just going to sit on my behind and wait for him to finish us? Not exactly." He laughed again.

"What's the plan?" somebody called from the back of the room. It was a captain from Prbno of Galaxy Seven. The young android blinked his three square eyelids and waited.

"Marco said he got my message about wanting to see him on Black-rock." Matt paused, waiting for the effect to strike. There was a chorus of ahs, sibilant and anxious.

"That means he must have landed there. If he landed there, he had to go to one of the cities, or he'd never have gotten the message. My guess is,

he chose Elfharin. And that's where I'm going to look for him."

"How many ships do you want?" a commander from Rigel called.

Matt drew his breath in slowly. "None. I'm going alone."

The captains jumped up, pushing over chairs, scrambling, yelling their protests. Time ran up on the stage and began arguing, shaking his artificial hand up and down until it made a steady blur.

"Keep quiet!" Matt yelled, raising his arms.

"You know what kind of a place Blackrock is," Time shouted, "and Elfharin...if they ever found out who you were, you'd be pulled to pieces. You can't go."

Matt shouted again, "Keep quiet!" His face was livid as the shouting died. "I'm going alone, in a flier. The *Caliban* will lie about a thousand miles outside the atmosphere, with light shields up so they can't detect us. That's final. Get back to your ships, and wait for orders as to what space lanes you're to take.

Someone called attention loudly. Boots snicked together. Matt raised his sword in front of his face, brought it down sharply. Then the captains started out of the hall, pushing toward the doors.

Matt turned to Time, his face carved in a strange, almost sadistic grin. "For all his talk, my brother's made some mistake, somewhere. By God, I'll find it. Now listen to me, Time. Draw up a list of the principal shipping lanes. Alert the Central Depot on Merthor to brief all ships on battle precautions, and send a report back to headquarters in Galaxy One. Assign the war rockets to various lanes, the way I said. I'm going down to the Concealment Lab. When the rest of the fleet goes, set the course for Blackrock."

DOWN IN the iron bowels of the ship, the men were preparing for jet-off tune. They worked busily behind the lead shields, tending the huge piles that chained up force and drove the flagship. Matt smiled in satisfaction, and then he remembered the corpses and the wreckage in the gold dawn of Argon and his face darkened.

The Concealment Lab was a big, barn-like room on a lower deck. There were banks of setup which controlled the screens that kept out light rays. There were great nets for covering the ship while it lay on the ground. The sharp, not unpleasant aroma of paint filled the entire room.

In one corner were several large chairs. A furry man with great pink-faceted eyes, dressed in the uniform of Sol, Incorporated, sat lazily in one of them, chewing on a fibrous green weed.

"Get off your can, Forg," Matt said.

Forg jumped up, knocked his heels together and said in his purring voice, "Yes, sir, Commander Cain."

Matt heaved himself into the chair, closing his eyes. He was tired. But the job was only started.

"Personal disguise this time, Forg. Slash my face. Give me a couple of scars...um...let's say the left eye socket empty...not much hair. And get out some old clothes. Tunic, cloak, everything. Disreputable. You understand."

"Perfectly, sir."

Matt waited. The needle slid into his cheek, and coldness crept through his facial muscles. Soft darkness pulled at his brain. He let himself fall into it.

When he opened his eyes, Forg held up a mirror proudly. Matt looked at himself. The plastic pigment was now a part of his skin, and could be removed only by another member of

Forg's race. There were two raw scars, on his forehead and across his right cheek, and his eye socket was a ragged hole with crusty brown edges. His skin seemed to have an almost invisible coat of filth on it.

"All right," Matt said. "Now the clothes."

A few minutes later, he inspected himself in the long mirror. He had changed swords, using now a thick-bladed saber. There was a dagger on a chain around his neck and a blaster strapped beneath his armpit. His boots were black, dirty. The cloak was torn. A scarf of Callistan dream silk was knotted around his neck, and hung raffishly down his shirt front.

Matt smiled, and the grotesque figure in the mirror seemed to be making its mouth writhe. Forg rubbed his furry brown hands together. His pink eyes were proud and full of a thousand small fires. He purred gently.

Nodding approval, Matt left the shed-like room and took the elevator back up. He could feel the careening motion of the jets. The *Caliban* was flashing through the dark light-years to Blackrock.

He went back to his cabin, put in a call to Time on the bridge.

"Pull up a thousand miles off Elfharin. Have my flier ready. Tell the repair crew to bang it up a little, burn off the Sol markings. I'm going to sleep. Wake me a quarter-chron before rendezvous. The other ships get off all right?"

"Assignments completed," Time replied. "Listen, Matt...."

Matt yawned. He flopped down on the bed and yanked the red rope. Sleep gas began to fill the chamber.

"Didn't I tell you to keep quiet once today?" he said thickly. The lights dimmed slowly and died altogether. Closing the com connection, he pulled the curtains around the bed and turned over onto his stomach,

letting the warm cloying vapor carry him into fantastic swirling lands of sleep.

His last thought in the drugged darkness was, *I may not get any more sleep for a long, long time....*

THE FLIER, suitably damaged, lay in the airlock. Matt climbed into the cockpit.

"Where's Time?" he said to the officer standing by.

"I don't know, sir."

Matt narrowed his good eye. "He called me from the bridge."

"I suppose he's still there, sir," the officer said helpfully.

"Yeah. I suppose he is. I'll be back presently." His laugh was short and bitter. He slammed the cockpit closed. The lock doors clanged. The controls responded under his hands and the flier shot forward into space. Rapidly the *Caliban* I became lost in the dark. Her lights shone dimly. Then they were gone. That would mean the protective screens had gone up.

Matt concentrated on his course. Blackrock lay ahead, a single small planet revolving around a red dwarf star. Continents slowly became clear. Matt made out the volcanic highlands. Somewhere down there was Elfharin, the toughest city. Marco would go to the toughest city.

Abruptly, he swept the saber from its sheath, sprang out of his chair and crouched, peering into the dimness of the flier cabin. A voice had spoken his name. The flier jet made a solitary whisper. Matt waited, the cabin control lights throwing soft reflected radiance on the sword blade.

Time walked out of the shadows.

"I couldn't let you come alone," he explained, sheepishly, fingering the plate in his skull. "I decided I'd better..."

Deliberately Matt slid the blade back into place. He walked forward,

grunted softly and slugged the little man in the belly. Time doubled over. Matt clubbed his neck. Time groaned and rolled—on the floor. His metal hand made a ludicrous clanking sound when it struck.

"Get up," Matt said.

Time got up and Matt hit him again, this time on the jaw. The little man leaned against a locker, gasping for air.

"One thing you've got to learn," Matt told him. "That's to follow orders. None of my men, not even you, are going to disobey my orders."

"I left Orbeck on duty," Time protested, wiping a little dribble of blood from the corner of his mouth. "Orbeck's a good man."

"Just remember, don't disobey my orders again. Right now I'm stuck with you. So keep quiet and do what I tell you. Understand?"

"Sure," Time muttered, with just a faint trace of tiredness. "Oh, sure, I understand."

Matt turned back to the controls, ignoring Time. The flier was into the atmosphere of Blackrock. Below, Elfharin, the City of the Hill, rose on the slope of a mountain. The volcano chain spread across the jumbled land as far as Matt could see. Yellow fire and smoke belched from the conical towers of stone.

Matt set the flier down on the rocket field just below the city. He pushed a triangular coin from a bag tied at his belt into the meter. To Time he said, "You wait here. Watch for me. If I'm running, get the jets going, and fast. And that's an order."

He threaded his way through ancient rockets with patch plates scarred by their rusty sides. Beyond the field, he walked up the hill and into the city of Elfharin.

Elfharin. One side of Blackrock was constantly lost in dark as it revolved around the red dwarf. The other side was seared desert. And here, it was always the half-world between darkness and the day.

Elfharin lay on the side of a great mountain. The mountain rumbled deep inside itself and blossomed with yellow fire that made the air sulfurous and hot. The city was built in terraces. Matt climbed through narrow alleys smelling of garbage and lit by small oil lamps in the windows of the plaster buildings. Water dripped down over the steps, carrying with it filth and refuse of a hundred races.

Elfharin was an outcast's city on an outcast's planet. Here came the hunted men, watching the stars for pursuit, faces burned by jet blasts, hands ready to grab and kill. Matt felt that of all the cities in the twilight zone of Blackrock, Elfharin would be where Marco would stop.

The lower terraces of the city were relatively deserted. Shadows moved in doorways. There were occasional shouts. Once the volcano flamed, high above, and Matt saw a dead woman in a doorway with her neck slashed. She lay there, eyes shining in the mountain fire. Matt hurried on.

The upper terraces were teeming. Some kind of festival was in progress. Musicians played somewhere, and men and women chanted and danced on the flagstones between the buildings. The small plaza to which Matt came at last was full of beings from many worlds. Their costumes made butterfly splashes of color, and the chant lifted and filled the sky. On top of one of the buildings, a Terran woman wearing only a skirt swayed drunkenly and sang in a high powerful voice, adding a note of keening madness to the whole frantic celebration.

Matt threaded his way through the crowd. His eyes caught a sign above a

IT WAS twilight. Red, bloody-film twilight. It was always twilight in

door. *Outpost Inn*. He pushed past a group of dancers and went inside.

It was a small shop. Men sat at one table, bearded, big-bodied men, drinking. A round fishbelly-white Globular from Galaxy Two was behind the bar, polishing six bottles with his twelve tentacles.

Matt walked over to the bar. "Can I get some information?"

The Globular set down all six bottles and spread his tentacles, suckers down, on the bar. His round mouth opened and a wheezing came forth. Matt had to lean close to catch the words.

"What type of information does the Earthman wish?"

"I'd like to find out about something. Who could I see? It would have to be someone who knows every one of the illegal activities in the city." Matt allowed his mouth to screw up and winked broadly with his one good eye.

"That would be Lace Fredrick," came the reply. Four tentacles waved at the table of men. "There."

Matt put down one of the triangular coins and went over to the table. The men, seven of them, stopped drinking. They watched him, hands hovering at the edge of the table. From the plaza came the frenzied singing, the shouting, the high soprano voice.

"Lace Fredrick?" Matt asked quietly.

ONE OF the men got up. He was dressed like the others, in rough tunic, breeches and boots, but he was subtly different. He had a thin face and close-cropped blond hair. His blue eyes were full of innocence and cleverness. He knotted a lace handkerchief in one slender hand. He might have been young or old.

"Yes?" he said. His voice sounded almost like a woman's.

"I want to talk to you," Matt replied.

"Charming," Lace Fredrick commented wryly. "Let's step into the back room, shall we?"

He moved ahead of Matt, gracefully, like a dancer in the video ballet. But there was a subtle repulsiveness above the movement, and Matt thought of a silicon snake, brittle and swaying and infinitely deadly.

Lace Fredrick closed the door to the back room and sat down at a table after lighting the small blue radiant lamp in the wall.

Matt sat down opposite him. "I want information," he said again, taking the bag of coins from his belt and setting it down on the table. There was a clinking rattle.

"That sounds adequate," Lace Fredrick said. He waved his handkerchief aimlessly. His other hand was in his lap. "Just exactly what kind of information did you wish?"

"I'm looking for a man named Cain," Matt said.

Lace Fredrick pursed his pretty lips. "Not Matthew Cain, Galaxy Commander for the Sol Shipping Fleet?"

Matt laughed shortly. "Hell no. I don't like men that keep me from making a living."

"Oh," said Lace Fredrick very softly.

"I heard that Marco Cain, his brother, was recruiting some kind of fleet here," Matt said carefully, watching the other man's face. "I heard that he could use good fighting hands."

"You heard correctly, but unfortunately the fleet has gone. Some time ago."

Matt felt a sudden rush of inward triumph. His idea that perhaps Marco had secured his ships and men here, on promise of booty, had been correct.

"You don't know where I can catch up with him, do you?"

Lace Fredrick studied the wall behind Matt's head. "No, not really. I heard that he has a supply station on Set, along with quarters for his mistress. Two valuable properties."

"What part of Set?" Matt asked eagerly. "I have a flier...."

"Near the Ruined Temples of the Pear Worshippers, I believe," Lace Fredrick replied. "But I don't think that would be of any benefit... *Matthew Cain.*"

Matt's hand darted for the saber hilt.

"I wouldn't," Lace Fredrick said. "I have had a blaster on your stomach for quite some time." His other hand came up, and the ugly snout of the weapon thrust at Matt's head.

"Put down the blade," Lace Fredrick said affably.

Matt put it on the table. "How in hell..." he began.

The other man pulled open his tunic, laughing. There was a black T branded into the flesh.

"Telepath...." Matt breathed. "Of all the kinds of two-bit killers I had to run into, it had to be a telepath!"

"I'm extremely sorry," Lace Fredrick said with faint mockery. "I think you had better turn around."

Matt turned, reaching for the throat of his tunic. He took a low dive for the floor. Lace Fredrick fired. The wall smoked and there was a loud puff. By that time, Matt had the dagger from inside his tunic. He jerked the chain. It bit his neck and broke. He threw it as Lace Fredrick was swinging the blaster down toward his head.

The knife buried itself in Lace Fredrick's right eye. His scream keened upward and he fell across the table, the blood running down his face.

Matt grabbed the saber and jerked the door open. In the main room, Lace Fredrick's friends were up from

their table, coming toward him. He swept up one of the tables, grunted, and tossed it across the room. It caromed into the men, throwing them backward. Matt was running toward the door, kicking over other tables behind him.

THE SQUARE was still noisy with singing and laughter. Matt pushed through the milling crowds, fighting them, kicking them out of the way, swearing. The laughter and music was horrible in his ears.

Across the plaza from the Outpost Inn, he stopped in the shadow of a pillar. The men were crowding through the door, searching for him. He wanted to see which direction they would take.

High above, beyond the terraces of buildings reaching toward the misty red sky, the volcano roared and erupted. Yellow brilliance washed over the square. Matt winced as the light filled the shadow in which he stood for a few moments. Across the square, one of the men saw him. They pushed their way through the mob.

He ran, away from the noise and the light and the music. He stumbled down the dark alleyways, over the steps dripping with water, toward the bottom of the hill. He heard boots pounding behind him. They could hear his footsteps, he assumed. His chest hurt and he breathed with effort.

Stumbling, he picked himself up. His breeches were soaked and dirty. His feet felt terribly heavy. He was running down a long flight of steps, in the dark.

The volcano flamed again. He cursed as the light swept over him. Renewed shouting split the air behind him. A blaster exploded and a piece of plaster wall crumbled to nothing near his head.

He dodged around a corner. A

woman whispered from a doorway. Jerking himself to a halt, he moved into the shadows, put his arm around her and kissed her hard on the mouth. She felt fat and sloppy, but he kept on kissing her, and hoped to God that the volcano wouldn't flame again.

The men came running down the street. They clumped past, shouting angrily, swearing, only one of them looking in the doorway. They hurried on without stopping. Matt kept her mouth on his, not letting her go, until their pounding boots died away and only the music and the confusion from the higher terraces filled the air.

Matt pushed her away. She moaned and rubbed her body against him. He ran from the doorway and down another alley.

On and on, for endless miles of stairs, Matt ran. He leaned against the walls, practically falling down the steps. His mouth went open and closed in great gulps, gasping for air. At last, the ground leveled and he came out from among the last straggling buildings. Walking shakily, he moved through tumbled boulders toward the flier field.

Time saw him coming and lifted the flier a foot off the ground. Matt clambered inside, slid the cockpit closed.

"Get back to the *Caliban*," he said. "Fast."

Time nodded, jerking back the control bar. The flier went almost straight up. The mountains tilted insanely, the volcano seemed to shoot out a stream of fire along a horizontal plane. The red misty air began to darken, and at last they broke out into outer space.

Matt worked with the com set. He contacted Orbeck, the officer Time had left in command of the flagship.

"I'm coming in. Have the guide lights on."

"Right, sir. We got a beam from headquarters back in Galaxy One.

They give you full authority, and they say if you can stop your brother, they'll make you a Tri-galactic Commander."

Matt tried to laugh and could not. But his deformed face was bunched and twisted into dreadful humor. "That's all I want," he said in a croaking voice. "Law and order and all the rest of that crap, all we want is to get someplace. Isn't that right, Orbeck?"

"Yes, sir," said Orbeck respectfully.

Matt turned off the set. Time was watching him. He turned his head quickly.

Matt kept on smiling. Far out in space, the tiny points of the *Caliban I* guide lights winked on. He knew which way he was going, now.

He knew which way he was going, to get his brother.

Chapter III

THE WOMAN AND THE BOMBS

ONCE BACK in the *Caliban*, Matt had Forg remove the plastic pigment. He went to his cabin, washed his face to remove the feeling of dirt, and drank a third of a pint of liquor. Then he went to the chart room.

One of the beamtypes was clacking out a message. Time bent over it, watching. Matt joined him, saw the paper coming forth, heard the clatter of the keys. His eyes had been dull and heavy, but now they burned, as he read the message.

From Sol Inc Transport Base, Pl Octov, City Augberg, Gal Eighteen, To Mt Cain, Cmndr Gal Eighteen, Caliban One, Somewhere in space. Unidentified fleet attacked cargo fleet containing valuable shipments of iridium one hour out from launching. Three convoy war rockets destroyed. Cargo ships entered, all crewmen forced through air locks into outer

space. Iridium taken aboard raiding ships marked with purple M C on hull. Cargo-ships evidently blown up, as have not been heard from. Early report said raiding ships appeared in space. Repeat, appeared. No survivors located. End message.

The machine stopped its noisy clatter. Matt could almost see his brother's men forcing the crewmen out into the airless void without space suits. He could almost see the bodies bursting like soft pulpy mushrooms.

He beckoned Time away from the machine, passed him a cigarette.

"Did you learn anything at Elfhar-in?" Time asked.

"Not a lot. Only one thing that might be of use. Marco is supposed to have a supply base on Set, near the Temples of the Pear Worshippers. Know where it is?"

Time shook his head. "But we can check it easily enough in the Galaxy Coordinate File."

"You'd better do it," Matt told him. "It's about the only approach we've got. Fix a course for Set. We'll take a look at this place. That's... let's see..." He paused to calculate.

"A long way," said Time. "Almost all the way across the Galaxy."

"Put the reflection screens on the outside of the ship so we'll shoot back the light when we land. That's about all for now."

Time knocked his heels together and walked off.

Matt went back to his cabin and finished the remainder of the pint of liquor. Then he took the elevator to the recreation deck and watched the latest telefilms for several hours. The ship was plunging through space and he needed rest. He took a shower, sat in the pneumatic massage room for a while, changed uniforms and returned to the bridge.

THE NEXT several hours were spent in loud and angry debate

with Time over the best possible means of checking Marco.

At the end, Matt threw the slide rule down on the table. "Damn it, we can't know where he's going to strike next. We've got pitifully few ships, and we've got to take our chances until we can get in a crippling blow."

A loudspeaker crackled and a voice announced, "Position, five hundred miles outside the atmosphere of Planet Set."

Matt unhooked a microphone from the edge of the slanting table. "Put up the screens."

"They're already up, sir," the loudspeaker announced.

"Are we above the Ruined Temples of the Pear Worshippers?"

"Correct, sir."

"All right, mister." The rumble of jets was temporarily reduced to a low whine. Matt looked around. The astrogators listened eagerly, eyes excited, full of hunger for a chance to strike back. "I want two hundred men with riot guns in Lock A when we land. What's the terrain like?"

"Heavy jungle, sir."

"Jungle, eh. Well, make it about a mile from the ruins."

"Yes, sir." The voice boomed from the loudspeaker, shaking and anxious for the next command.

Matt said sharply, "Take her down."

The mighty explosion of the atomics rocked the chart room. Matt clung to the table until the gravity neutralizers came on. The push of deceleration stopped.

"Now I'm ordering you to come with me," Matt said to Time. "Orbeck in command," he bawled.

A beefy man on the catwalk high above slapped his heels together and waved.

In Lock A, the two hundred men were assembled, smoking and jostling one another. There was a gentle bump.

"Let's hope they didn't hear the jets," Matt said, slipping into a gray rubberized suit. "I don't think Marco's boys would know about things like reflection shields. If they looked for a ship to go with the sound, they wouldn't see a thing but sky." He laughed shortly, glancing around the assembled men.

"What's it like out there?" he asked.

A slight Oriental pushed his way into the crowd. "Little oxygen, sir. Helmets will be required. It is early morning, according to the rotation charts. Very warm. It would be better to plug in the cooling units," he finished crisply.

Matt studied him. "What's your name?"

"Lee, sir. Moy Lee, Atmospheric Control Officer, third class."

Attaching the cooler pack to his belt, Matt said, "You'll be second class before long, Lee. I like men who know their business."

Lee smiled from brown parchment cheeks and slipped the shining bowl of his helmet over his head. Matt put on his own helmet, called for order in the inter-suit microphone. He held up the heavy round-snouted riot gun in one gloved fist.

"See this? If we can find any of Marco's men, we're going to use them. Deploy in fourteenth combat formation. *Now open those doors!*"

THE LOCK swung ponderously open. Matt went first, leaping off the edge of the landing stage. It was a drop of six feet. He landed running, Time right behind him. The ship had smashed a great hole in the jungle. Matt ran forward, scrambled over a bent tree trunk and slithered on his belly, waiting. Time came up beside him. Matt took in the situation. The men were already on the ground, the scouts somewhere ahead in the tangled

growth. Behind them, the trees seemed unbroken. There was no *Caliban I*.

The jungle was dark and wet, filled with twisting moisture vapors. Loud inane screeches of fantastic blue birds with transparent fan-like wings filled the headphones. The cooling unit whispered silently. Drops of icy water rolled from Matt's armpits.

Far overhead, the trees pointed up to a morning sky like a sheet of polished silver. Matt's face was in a clump of saw-edged fuschia grass. He moved his left leg. There was a sound of sucking mud.

"Scout team reporting," a voice said in the phone.

"Proceed," Matt whispered.

"We're at the edge of the Temples. There's a big clearing. The Temples make a wall around it. We can't see what's inside. There are signs of habitation, though, and a part of the ground looks like it's been burned by jets."

"Can you see any men?" Matt asked tensely.

"None at all, sir."

"We'll come forward. Get off the line."

There was a short buzz. Matt spoke into the mike. "On your feet. Move forward in formation. Deploy along the edge of the clearing. Await further orders."

He closed the switch with his teeth, got to his feet. Time followed. They moved deeper into the forest, riot guns at ready. The two hundred spread out and walked slowly, boots sucking in the mud, like so many gray corpses in the humid empty world of the forest. The fan-winged birds dipped and circled and screamed.

It was a mile to where the trees ended. Matt pushed forward on his stomach, looked out. The Ruined Temples of the Pear Worshipers were great fallen towers of brown stone, each one topped with a shimmering

bronze artifact that resembled the Terran fruit. Nothing moved. Only the birds wheeled in the silver sky, making their mad shrieking noise.

Matt tensed. The whole scene was too deserted. Beyond the brown towers could lie... anything.

"Scouts forward," he whispered. "On the run."

A line of fifteen gray-suited men broke from the trees, crouching low, racing toward the buildings. About a hundred yards from the first wall, they began to vanish. There was a series of loud explosions. White clouds shot through with streaks of fire mushroomed from the ground. Screams echoed in the phone.

The scouts were blown to pieces.

Matt felt himself retch. The smoke floated away. Pieces of gray rubber, fragments of a twisted riot gun, blood, half an arm, all these were on the ground.

"They've got the place mined," Matt whispered. "We can't get in..."

"Battle formation," Time whispered. "That's the way, Matt. Let's try to make it."

MATT GOT to his feet, huddled behind a tree, peering out. He gestured. The scene remained unchanged. No sign of life. Only the birds screaming and flapping their invisible wings. He said, "Who are we going to fight?"

Time sagged. "Matt, the men are restless. They've got to have..."

"You keep the men here. I'm going to look the place over myself." He clutched the riot gun, moved off through the fringe of trees, circling the temples.

The brown buildings ran all the way around the clearing. On the side opposite the position of his men, Matt paused. The breath came hard in his chest. There were footsteps coming rapidly through the forest.

Matt's mouth smiled, but his eyes

behind the helmet were frigid. He braced the riot gun on his hip, throwing off the safety. The footsteps came closer, crashing through the undergrowth.

Here at last was something you could fight. Here was something you could aim at, fire at. You could watch the red fireball spiral lazily, striking the person, burning the flesh off the bones and then burning the bones themselves.

The footsteps were a hundred yards away from Matt, on the edge of the clearing. He closed his finger around the firing trigger.

Abruptly, he jerked the barrel upward as he pulled the trigger. The fireball popped from the end of the gun, headed upward over one of the towers toward the forest.

Matt ran forward. The runner turned, raised hand to mouth.

Matt grabbed her and held her tightly.

It was Arna, the woman from Marco's ship, and she was naked.

Her soft heavy body shone in the sunlight. She fought his grip. Matt slung the riot gun over his shoulder and twisted her arm behind her back.

"Now," he breathed, opening the communication vent in the suit so she would hear him, "what's going on here?"

He watched her eyes carefully. He figured her to be the type of woman who would play in the safest direction, no matter what it was. Right now, he had her.

"I was bathing in a pool. I heard the explosions..."

"How can you breathe?"

"This box around my neck." It was a small tan affair, hanging on a chain between her breasts. "It sets up a portable oxygen field and neutralizes the mines, for at least an hour. That's what Marco said."

"There are mines all over?"

She nodded quickly. "Oh yes. Even inside the ring of temples. That's where all the supplies are stored, drums of fuel, weapons...."

"The teleportation unit?"

"I don't know," she said evasively.

He bent her arm behind her back.

"The teleportation unit?"

"No...I...it's on Marco's flagship...please...stop..."

He relaxed his grip a little. "What are you doing here?"

She tried to smile. "Marco said women don't belong when there's work to be done. He..."

"You can stop the act," he said coldly. "Where is Marco now?"

"I don't know," she said angrily. "He doesn't tell me everything."

"And the men that guard the base? I assume that there are men guarding it, since you're here."

She sensed the contempt in his tone, coughed once and spat at him. He wiped the saliva from his helmet with his free glove. "You'd better tell me."

"Out somewhere." She gestured to the jungle. "Hunting fresh food."

"You'd better keep that little machine turned on. We're going inside, and I wouldn't like to have you killed. Neither would Marco."

She said something obscene. He pushed her roughly ahead of him. They clambered over fallen pillars, through the dim interiors of the old brown buildings. There were empty altars, stained with the bloods of many races. Finally they came forth into the sunlight.

THE AREA enclosed by the temples was like a great amphitheatre. There were tents erected, packing cases stood tier on tier, round dark green fuel drums, holding the liquid chemicals used by Marco's non-atomic ships, lay in rows.

"Very nice," Matt commented. "And there are mines, even in here?"

"So I'm told." There was sudden hatred in her voice. Matt looked at her naked body in the silver sunglare and felt contempt and pity. Her beauty was fading, and there was little else left, it seemed. Someday Marco would get rid of her. But now...

"I've got an idea, Arna," Matt said.

"A fine idea." He jerked her along after him, toward the opposite side of the camp. As they emerged from the jumble of temple buildings, Matt saw Time gaping at them from the edge of the trees.

"Keep her," Matt ordered Time. "She may make a very nice hostage. Now..."

Time clawed the air behind Matt, pointing. "Ship!" he yelled.

"Marco's men?" Matt asked hurriedly.

"Yes," Arna replied triumphantly.

"Yes, Marco's men."

The rocket, a small class-eleven freighter, began to lower toward the charred area of the clearing.

Matt twisted the chain around Arna's neck, pulled loose the tan box. "How much of a human body, without this contraption, would set off the mines in the center?"

She didn't answer.

He pulled the riot gun off his shoulder, pressed the round muzzle against her white stomach. She shivered. Her voice was very faint. "Not much. They're all over."

The ship crunched down. The port swung open. About a dozen men got out, stretching lazily, hefting the carcasses of some strange breed of animal. Matt spoke into the suit phone, "Everybody keep quiet."

He handed Time the riot gun, with instructions to kill Arna if she made any sound. He knew, somehow, that she would not even try.

Recklessly, he began to run across the clearing. One of Marco's men spotted him, dropped the animal carcass,

reached for his blaster.

MATT RAN on, dodging around the rusty bulk of the ship, tan box clutched tightly in one fist. He bent low and scooped up a fragment of arm, the remains of one of his men. He was too afraid to feel revulsion.

Scrambling through the maze of the wrecked temples, he heard the men coming after him. There was a crooked stairway, leading up into damp darkness. He ran up there, emerged on a parapet that ran all the way around the tower.

The men broke through the ruins into the center of the clearing. He could see the tan boxes hanging around their necks. They searched the ruins with their eyes. One of them cried out hoarsely and pointed. A blaster roared. Part of the wall behind him sheared away in a clattering of dust and rock.

Matt drew himself up, whipped back his arm and threw the piece of human flesh and bone out and down into the center of the supply clearing. There were shouts of terror. He dashed around the parapet, crawled over it and jumped out into space.

The long, long fall, and then he smashed to the ground in a tumbler's roll. He came up running. Behind him, there was a slow rising noise, as of great mountains being thrown together.

Time and his men watched fearfully from the forest edge. The brown temples began to totter. A falling stone glanced off Matt's shoulder. Pain jarred through his body, but he ran on.

As he passed the rocket, he dropped the tan box deliberately. He could almost feel his feet jarring the mines beneath them. If he stopped for one instant...

The ground under him began to buckle and roar. The silver sky tilted a little. Matt braced his feet as he ran,

and took a long leap.

Explosion from the area outside the towers threw him up and forward. He crashed against a tree, slid down it while trying to put his arms around it, and lay with his face toward the ground while the whole planet of Set seemed to rock in its orbit and deafen his ears with its detonations.

Finally, the noise died. Matt got shakily to his feet and turned around. Time was watching the clearing. The ship was a useless tangled jumble. And no towers remained. The last ruins of the Pear Worshippers had fallen, and now they lay piled, stone on mighty stone, pressing down, covering over the fuel and the weapons of Marco Cain.

His brother would come back and find wreckage.

Time was chortling quietly. "Blew the goddam place sky high...blew it sky high..."

Matt's eyes fastened on Arna. She stood straight, gazing back at him from the helmet someone had given her.

"Are you important to my brother?" he asked cynically.

"Certainly. So important that..."

His brother would come back and find... *nothing!*

"Mister Time," Matt said sharply.

The little man knocked the padded heels of his suit together. "Yessir," his voice came through the phone.

"Take this woman back to the *Caliban* and lock her in one of the food bins. Don't give her anything to eat or drink...for a while."

Time called up a detail and they marched Arna off through the silent forest where the birds still dipped and howled. She looked back once, the sleepy expression gone. Her whole body was tense, rigid, drawn in harsh lines.

"How much can one person hate somebody else?" she asked softly, her

voice sounding tiny and edged through the phone.

"I know, I know," Matt laughed. "I'm still rotten." He put his lips around a cigarette, drew it from the container inside the helmet, lit it on a small grid. Puffing smoke, he let his anger rise in him. She and her detail were just vanishing through the foliage.

"Kick her," Matt said evenly. "In the stomach."

ONE OF THE men looked around, wondering. Then he realized who had given the order and he brought up his knee and ground it into her middle. She doubled over. The guards dragged her on through the mud. The black filth splattered on her white legs. Matt heard her soft groaning in the com phones as she vanished from sight.

"Assemble, march formation back," Matt ordered.

The men swung into line, some of them mumbling about the order Matt had given. They didn't like to see a woman kicked, Matt knew, but this one belonged to Marco. It was almost like injuring Marco himself.

He called for the *Caliban* to drop her reflection screens. Stripping off his suit inside the lock, he returned with the mate to the chart room, watched the beam type:

This time, the message said that Marco and his men had burned a whole city on Panbal, destroying the families of three thousand Sol workers. There had been torture, too. Unpleasant, stomach-turning torture.

"That's just one more thing I'll pay him for," Matt whispered. "He'll build himself up, slaughter after slaughter, and I'll knock him off and get a Tri-galactic for it!"

"You hope you'll knock him off," Time said doubtfully.

"I wouldn't question my orders, if I

were you," Matt said loudly so that all the astrogators could hear. "I wouldn't even question my opinions. You found that out once, didn't you?"

Time rubbed his metal-plated skull in exasperation. "For God's sake, Matt, cut it out. Stop acting like you're the biggest man space has ever seen. Marco feels that way, too. Sometime, one of the biggest men in space is going to have to die."

"It won't be me," Matt said, wondering, deep down, if he was right. Marco was striking oftener, harder. Would the destruction of the supply dump make any difference? Fuel, one ship, and a handful of men...

...and Arna!

"New orders," he barked. "Prepare to lift immediately."

Time relayed the orders.

"If I asked you," Matt said to the little man, "for the most Godforsaken planet in the whole galaxy, the one farthest away from human life, what would you give me?"

"Ithar," Time replied without thought.

"The course is for Ithar."

Time gaped at him, but proceeded to carry out orders.

Exultantly, Matt went down to the great galley, moved among rows of hydroponic trays, rows of bright kettles hanging from racks. The Martian chief cook gave him a loaf of fresh warm bread.

In the storage hold, Matt unlocked one of the big doors to a food bin. It creaked and rattled open. Overhead lights in the high ceiling made a long bar of illumination in the bin.

Arna was crouched, naked and shivering, on a mound of potatoes. That seemed marvelously funny to Matt. He laughed, tossing her the bread and some self-lighting cigarettes.

"Cold?" he said wryly. "I hope no, because you're going to have a long

ride. Maybe it'll warm you up!"

She cursed him, quietly, vengefully.

Matt slid the door shut, locked it. It was funny. Arna, the beautiful naked woman, crouching on top of potatoes.

The jets began to roar.

It was tremendously funny. Matt rested his back against the locker door and laughed for a long, long time.

CHAPTER IV THE FROZEN HOURS

LIKE SOME huge silver slug, the *Caliban I* lay on the frozen tundra of Ithar. Behind the ship, mountains rose bleakly, swept by freezing winds. The plain of ice went away to the horizon, a deep shadowed black. Two moons, like round white snowballs, hung over the crags. The sky was a rich velvety blue, covered with stars. Snow whorls moved on the plain, misty dancers leaping up, falling back, leaping again with the voices of wind.

Matt stood outside Lock A, shrouded in a great fur parka. His cigarette made a spot of light in the somber landscape. When he exhaled, the wind caught the smoke and whipped it away across the wasteland.

Eighteen hours they had been on Ithar. Eighteen hours without a reply to the message that drummed out, at fifteen-minute intervals, across the galaxy. Where was Marco now? Sweeping down on the space lanes, plundering the ships, turning the crewmen out into the void? Where was his laugh echoing now, in some far-off street of a great city, where women screamed and were raped in the streets, where blood dripped from window sills?

Marco strode across space in the thousand-league boots of teleportation, putting the torch to innumerable worlds. And, Matt thought, here I am, waiting for a reply to a stupid message. But it wasn't so stupid,

really. Arna was out of the food locker now, considerably more quiet. She was in Time's cabin and Time was with the noncoms. Arna was a valuable property.

Matt entered the lock after throwing away his cigarette. As he passed through the inner portal and drew off the parka, he reflected that he had thought a great deal about Arna in the past few hours. Why, he couldn't say. Perhaps it was due to the fact that she was the only woman he had been near in—how many fierce, driving years? Oh, there had been women, but they had come and flared brightly for a while, an hour, two, and gone into the limbo of forgetfulness.

As he made his way to the bridge, he decided to have a talk with Arna. He was curious to find out more about her, where she came from, why she had taken up with Marco.

Marco.

That name, and the loathing it brought, drove her from his thoughts. In the chart room, a communications officer was busy at the beam type, clacking out the message on the machine Matt had had set up specially. He leaned over the officer's shoulder and watched the paper in fascination. It would be a lovely trap.

From Mt. Cain, Coordinates lane 44, subsector 2, point 0.859, PI Ithar. To Marco Cain, somewhere space. I've got Arna. You know that. I want to talk. Come if you want her back.

TIME'S VOICE interrupted his concentration. "Seems like we're always waiting for Marco, doesn't it?" "This will be the final wait," Matt replied.

"He might bring the fleet again."

"That doesn't worry me. When he goes to Set, he'll know I have her."

"He might think she was killed in the blast."

"He'll know I'm not lying. We've

always been honest with one another." Matt's face darkened. "Up to now."

"You're fixing a trap for your brother?"

Matt faced Time, shaking a finger at him. "A trap that'll finish him. Without Marco, his men are helpless. And if I can get him alone, pretend to want to talk to him... I can kill him."

Time kept quiet for a minute. Then, "He'll have some men with him."

"But he won't be expecting me to cut him down where he stands. And that's exactly what I'll do."

"Tri-galactic means that much to you, does it?"

"Yes, it does."

"More than anything else?"

"Yes."

Time shook his head and smiled wanly. "May God have mercy on your soul," he said with gentle sarcasm.

"Hey!" the com officer shouted. "It's coming through!"

Matt pushed the officer out of the chair, sat down, his hands on the edge of the paper as it slid forth from the machine. He almost tore it loose as he got the message.

From Marco Cain, somewhere space. To my estimable brother. I'm coming to get her. And you'd better have all your ships there. You'll need them.

The machine went silent. Matt tore out the last of the paper, kept staring at it.

"There's more," Time said.

The machine clattered once again. The message was brief.

This is the big one. M C.

Matt scrambled to his feet, knocking over the chair. "Let's go. We've got to collect some ships, like he said. After I kill him, we'll have to wipe up his fleet. Completely. That'll finish the job in the right way."

They took the elevator to the com room. Ma stood under the eighty-

foot Galactic switchboard, mike in hand.

"All channels open?" he said to an officer.

The officer nodded.

"Attention all war rockets. Attention all war rockets in Galaxy Eighteen. This is Commander Cain. Five hundred of you will be designated to come to Ithar to furnish assistance. There is going to be a large combat force...."

He stopped. The officer in charge was fiddling with dials. The lights on the high board remained dark.

"What's wrong?" Matt asked.

"We're sending, aren't we?"

"I think so, sir," the officer replied.

"But there are no receiving signals."

"You mean that the com machinery on every one of our ships is out?"

"Either that sir, or..." The man flushed deeply, moving a switch back and forth.

"Or what? Damn you, speak up."

"He means," Time put in quietly, "either that, or there aren't any more of our ships left."

Matt choked. "W...w...what? Are you serious?"

TIME NODDED, metal skull glinting in the bright lights. "He could have done it. With teleportation, he could be all over the galaxy in the eighteen hours we've been here. Arriving one place, destroying three ships with a dozen or so of his own, teleporting to another sector, destroying more ships. We shouldn't have divided our strength."

"We had to! Otherwise, the cargo lanes would have been unprotected."

Time carefully lit a cigarette. The tension in the room mounted. "I'll wager that the cargo lanes are wide open now. The galaxy's like a trapped animal. There's no place to run any more. There's no protection anywhere."

Matt swore vengefully. He knotted

his fist around the microphone and threw it against the board. It shattered and hung in a fan of silver chunks at the end of the long cord. The cord slid back into the wall. The pieces rattled when they struck the board.

"What would you suggest we do now?" Matt said, almost shouting.

"There's nothing to do now but wait for Marco. And his ships. If he decides to blow us to pieces with his vortex cannon, there's nothing we can do then, either. If he comes aboard and talks, you may get a chance to kill him. He might want the satisfaction of seeing you crawl, but we'd still have his whole fleet to buck. One war rocket against two hundred is pretty heavy odds."

"That's encouraging," Matt said nastily. "All right, so we wait."

He turned and walked out of the room. For a long time he wandered in the corridors of the ship, climbing up and down to the various decks, sitting on companion ladders with his cloak pulled around him, smoking and thinking.

Trapped, was all he could think. Trapped and waiting for the butcher to come and slice us up in bloody little pieces.

When he looked up finally, saw the thick carpeting on the floor and Time's door in front of him, he knew he had been heading there instinctively, all along.

He knocked hesitantly, although he had a key.

Arna opened the door. She was pushing the hair out of her eyes, and she looked sleepy once more. Surprise darted across her face, then wariness.

"What do you want?"

"Can I come in?" He leaned tiredly against the door frame.

"What for?"

"I want to talk. I just want to sit down and talk."

She motioned him inside. The cabin

was warm. Arna walked over to a divan, sat down, pulling the thick woolen bathrobe close around her. "Your first mate has very good liquor and very small clothes." The bathrobe barely covered her knees.

Matt grinned weakly, sat down across from her. He took a whisky bottle off the small cart and took a long drink. Fire started to run around in his stomach. It was pleasant fire. The lights in the room were soft purple, restful on the eyes. Arna leaned on the back of the divan, head on her arm, watching him.

"I am rotten," he said, taking another drink. "And tired, at that."

"Don't you like the frozen countryside?" she asked, smiling with mockery.

"I'm nuts about it. I'll be buried in it. We'll all be. Your lover took care of that."

She sat up straight, her eyes open wide. "Don't call him that."

"What?"

"My lover."

HE WAVED the bottle and took another drink, slouching down. He felt particularly nasty, but now he felt like being nasty to himself. "The man you go to bed with, then."

"That's it. That's all right. It was a business arrangement. I was working in a third-rate video studio on Rogweb in Galaxy Four. Your brother was there. A revolution was on. I met your brother. He was being paid to lead troops in the revolution. He told me a lot of things, how he would bleed Galaxy Eighteen, knock you down from your noble perch. It sounded very nice. I came along, like I always do, when there's something to be had."

The liquor began to thicken Matt's tongue. He unfastened his cloak and threw it on the floor. The red lining shimmered.

"Blood," he mumbled. "Mine.

Yours. Everybodys. Except Marco's."

"You ought to talk sense."

"It isn't sensible," he replied roughly. He kept on talking, spilling out the situation. She listened. When he was finished, he took another drink from the bottle. It was empty. He reached for a second.

"So you're going to kill him if he comes to see you."

"He'd kill me," Matt replied defensively.

"Does that make it right?"

"Oh, sentimental," he said sarcastically. "Very sentimental. Now you're dead and in your grave and you want me to shower him with brotherly love. Listen..." He struggled over the word. Saliva filled his mouth. He swallowed.

"Listen," he began again. "It's been going on since we were kids, back in the Ganymede Outlands, Galaxy One. Get ahead. Get ahead of the other one. Marco's got a girl. Matt has to get a girl. Marco gets a prettier one. Marco gets money. It goes on and on and on." He drank again.

"You've always been running just a little behind him?"

"Yes, just a little. He enjoys watching me lag. He's always got to be ahead. That's why we hate each other, I guess."

"Have you ever killed any one before. I mean, the way you're going to kill Marco?"

He pursed his lips and peered at her. The room had a film around the edge, but she was in the center, very clear. "No."

"Has he?"

"Killed anyone? Oh sure, three or four that I know of. Always got to be ahead, you know."

"I hope you don't kill him, Matt."

He gurgled drunkenly. "That's pretty. Say my name again. It's pretty."

She paid no attention, hurried on

softly, insistently. "Don't kill him. People like us can do a lot of rotten things, but once we take that last step, killing someone without being attacked, we can't ever go back to being even halfway decent and clean inside."

He stood up, swaying. The bottle was raised. "Lovely talk," he said loudly. "We're all so decent, all of us in this stinking pigpen." He spit out the last words. Drops of saliva sailed through the beam of a lamp, burned, vanished.

His legs went rubbery under him. The bottle rolled on the floor, dripping liquor on the rug. Matt struggled on his knees. He fell forward onto the rug, one hand twitching. He whimpered, "We're all so goddamned decent..."

She was pulling at him then. Pulling him up to a sitting position. Her face was close to his, the hair falling down, touching his face with a warm tingling. "We can try to be, Matt."

Helping him to his feet, she stood close to him. The purple lights moved in her hair. Like he was reaching out to touch some strange object, he put his arms around her, wonderingly. She held him tightly, her mouth searching his.

He was lost between worlds, wandering out where there was no Marco, no frozen tundras of ice, no death and no drive. For a moment, he was lost in purple and breaking rainbows and shards of sunlight and all the old songs he had always wanted to listen to and enjoy.

And then he was back in Time's cabin, with a desirable woman in his arms. The brain fog seemed to clear a little bit. He put his left arm under her legs, lifted her. She lay against his shoulder, kissing his neck.

He took one step.

"Do...do you want it...this way...like this..." he mumbled.

"Yes," she said, over and over.

He walked on and on, through fields of night. Something got in his way. He kicked it aside. For dark joyous miles he walked, and then at last he did not have to walk any more. He found the strange world again, below heaven, above hell, where there were only sunlit mornings and music and warm arms drawing him down and down and down forever....

THUNDER, beating and beating in his brain. Slowly - and slowly diminishing, until it was only a fist, pounding on the door. Matt staggered into the main room, tucking in his shirt. He pulled the door open, stuck his neck forward, finally saw Time. The little man was rubbing his metal hand into his other palm, excitedly. "Message coming through," he blurted, "from you brother."

Arna called to him from the darkness. "Marco," he yelled, scooping up his cloak and slamming the door. They ran toward the elevator. Matt bumped unsteadily against the wall, but kept on going.

"Is he coming?" Matt cried anxiously.

"Don't know," Time told him as the elevator began to hum downward. "The message just began to come through. I couldn't raise you on the com anywhere in the ship. I took a chance on her."

They walked rapidly into the chart room. Nearly all of the fuzziness was gone from his brain. He felt instead, a cool relief. He was ready for whatever might be coming.

The com officer at the special beam type handed him the paper.

To Matthew Cain, From Marco Cain. Thanks for waiting, brother. It gave me time to assemble my fleet. You have no more ships, you know, except the flagship. I'm going to take the Galaxy apart, piece by piece, and

then hunt you down. First stop, Merthor.

Time nodded. "He knows he's got us. There are...good God...eighteen million people on Merthor...and the repair shops...and the factories...almost all of the Sol resources that are left. If he gets Merthor, he's finished Galaxy Eighteen. And he won't stop there."

"Merthor," Matt whispered.

The room was silent. Beyond the high catwalk and the great observation window, wind ghosts cavorted on the plain. The snowball moons rose upward in the sky over Ithar.

"If we wait here," Matt reasoned aloud, "we're finished. Correct?"

Time nodded again.

"We're dead men, Time. Dead men on a dead ship. Marco's heading for Merthor with a fleet of say, two hundred. He can teleport all the way around the planet in a moment, correct?"

The steel head wagged again. Matt laughed.

"Then tell me this," Matt breathed. "How much damage can a ship full of dead men do?"

Time thought. He flexed his left hand. The metal joints squeaked faintly.

"They should," he said slowly, "be able to do a lot. If they're dead, they haven't got much to lose."

Matt roared with triumphant laughter. "I've got one hell of a smart first officer." His hand seized the microphone. He yelled orders. "Stations. Raise ship immediately. Course for Merthor. Full power. Get off your big fat tails and get to work!"

The old fire was racing through him, consuming him, but it was tempered with new strength. Strength that made unbreakable chains out of soft hair, strength that made powerful drugs from a half-awake expression.

THE jets exploded. The astrogators whipped out fresh charts, began plotting coordinates. Matt vaulted up the ladder to the catwalk, watched Ithar with its mountains and its ice fall away under them. Then the atmosphere was gone, and the galaxy stretched wide and waiting, for the iron colossus with the heart of atomic burning. The *Caliban I* vibrated and plunged through the dark.

Time joined him.

Matt clapped him on the back. "A coffin ship full of corpses, eh, Time? But we'll make the biggest damned funeral pyre Galaxy Eighteen ever saw. Looks like there's no Tri-galactic in the offing."

"Looks that way," Time agreed.

"Just a chance to finish a few of Marco's friends."

"What about Marco himself?"

Matt shook his black tangled head slowly. "I don't think we'll get that far."

The *Caliban* rushed on, bleeding a trail to slash the blackness. Merthor began to grow, a planet two worlds away from a huge yellow sun.

"Twelve thousand miles off," Time reported, coming on the catwalk. "Correct to schedule, correct to course."

"We'll be...."

The *Caliban* lurched. Matt leaped for the window. The galaxy seemed to be falling away, or perhaps the ship seemed to be falling down into a spatial well. The stars went upward and the inside of the ship grew deathly cold.

Matt screamed frantically, "Counter-warp drive!"

Someone relayed the order. A whining hum rose in the bowels of the ship. Gradually, they seemed to pull up out of the funnel of infinite black. The coldness seeped away. The plates stopped their protesting groans. Once more they were thundering toward

Merthor.

Matt leaned against the wall, rubbing his forehead. "I'd almost forgotten that was there. Another moment and we'd have been through the warp and dead and frozen in hyperspace."

"And no way to get back," Time put in. "No way for the coffin ship to get back and fight."

The hour ticked slowly away. Matt watched as the *Caliban* swirled into the misty upper atmosphere of the planet.

"Look down there," he pointed. A city was blazing, a great bonfire of ships and humanity and machines. The day side of the planet was a smoking ruin.

"The night side," Matt breathed. "That's where he is." He raised his voice, felt the hoarseness in it. "Alter course!"

Time dictated the new coordinates. The *Caliban* flashed around Merthor, crossed the dark unreal line of twilight, plunged into the darkness. More cities were burning. The face of the world was exploding. Tiny dots of ships appeared, vanished, appeared again, outlined in the glow of the holocaust.

"Greb," Matt said. "The main base ... it's still untouched."

"They must be saving it for the last."

"We're going down."

The *Caliban* reared and nosed downward. Matt clambered off the catwalk, picked up the phone.

"Cannoneers!" he shouted, his voice huge and joyous and mad. "Stations!"

He turned to Time, shook the little man's hand. "Watch out for Arna. I'll see you sometime."

Time's eyes got distant, faintly dim. He swallowed, hard, pressed Matt's hand. "Sure, Matt, sometime."

"I'm going up with the guns," Matt

called, stripping off his cloak and tunic as he ran.

In the forward gun room, the air was hot and heavy, like a humid blue dusk. The cannoneers grunted and adjusted their coordinates, their bodies shining with sweat in the small pilot lights.

Matt raced into the room, shouted to them.

"Guns ready," one of them reported.

"Let me do this," Matt breathed, climbing up into the high seat. He strapped himself down, put his hands on the control lever. He sighted through the view tube.

Below, a part of the city of Greb was beginning to burn. A ship marked with a phosphorous *MC* flashed before the view tube. Matt yanked the lever.

The ship rocked, and the vortex spread out and enveloped the other ship. It vanished in a cloud of thundering whiteness.

Like some fantastic god, dripping with sweat, Matt rocked in the firing seat, pulling the lever and laughing, while the *Caliban I* plunged deeper into the fury, deeper into the battle that was already lost.

CHAPTER V

THE COFFIN SHIP

FOR seemingly endless hours, the *Caliban* dipped and bucked over the city of Greb. Blasts shook the hull. The vortex cannons spewed out their white force. Marco's ships vanished entirely or flamed scarlet in the dark, or dropped, great pieces shearing away, bodies tumbling out of the wrecked ships to bloat tremendously and splatter a rain of blood and soft gray guts over space.

Matt pulled the cannon firing lever, pulled it again, again. His muscles

contorted like snakes under his sweating hide. His laughter went on, rising, now falling, vanishing to a macabre chuckle, fountaining up to a tremendous rocking peak.

One of the crewmen was pulling at his arm, frantically thrusting forward a microphone and a receiver with the other hand. Matt jerked the lever once more, squinting through the eye tube. The vortex flashed, encircling one of Matt's ships. It ceased to exist.

"Urgent message from the bridge, sir," the cannoneer barked.

Matt paused for a moment, seemed to collect his thoughts. Then he unstrapped himself, got down wearily from the high seat. He gestured to another of the cannoneers.

"Take over."

Eagerly, a slaty Venusian scrambled up.

Matt put the phone to his ear.

"This is Cain," he said rapidly.

"Time, Matt. They're beginning to notice us. We've been dropping quite a few of their tin cans."

"I think you'd better come up to the bridge."

"Why?"

"The fleet is pulling out into space, collecting itself. They're coming to get us, all at once."

"How many?"

"Oh, maybe a hundred and fifty."

"Is the flagship still up?" Matt's voice was soft, anxious, vicious.

"I can't be sure."

Matt dropped the phone, ran toward the door. The gun room was filled with an acrid smoky haze. The pilot lights gleamed and danced along the wet bodies of the men.

In the elevator, Matt leaned weakly against the wall, gasping air into his tortured lungs. It wouldn't be very long before they were finished. But meanwhile...

The elevator stopped. Matt walked into the chart room.

Arna was there, with Time. She was awake now, dressed in a regulation tunic and breeches. She stood with feet wide apart, watching him, a strange kind of brilliance lighting up her eyes. Her breasts thrust against the tunic, moving up down, up down, quickly.

Matt squeezed her hand, felt the fingers warm on his. To Time he said, "You kept the ship moving well. We accounted for quite a few."

"I'd advise you to go up there and look for yourself," Time said worriedly.

"All right. Meanwhile, get me the commander down at Greb."

He vaulted up the ladder to the catwalk. Far out in space, beyond the night side of the planet, ships were gathering, outlined in the fiery glare from the cities that burned on the other side of Merthor. Faint splotches of light were on those ships. Matt knew those splotches were letters.

"We haven't got long," he said, agreeing with Time when he came down from the window. Time handed him the phone, saying, "Greb."

"Hello," Matt said sharply. "This is Commander Cain."

A VOICE, bearing heavy guttural traces, said, "Von Feist, Captain of Transport Base."

"How badly is the city hit?"

"Not too badly, *Herr Cain*. Some of the outer buildings are burning. Only a few of the vortex blasts landed."

"Have you got any ships?"

"Ach... *nein*, *Herr Cain*, only a few cargo transports, light classes mostly, thirty or so fliers... nothing heavy with armament..."

"Put them up," Matt ordered. "Have you got enough men to handle them?" He wiped a trickle of sweat running down his chest.

"With skeleton crews, yes, but of what possible use..."

"Goddam you," Matt yelled. "I said put them up. Right away. You've got women and kids in the city, haven't you?"

"Yes, oh yes, *Herr Cain*. My family..."

"Then put up those ships."

The voice became precise. "Very well, *Herr Cain*. Any further orders?"

"Yes. There's one way to do damage to enemy ships."

Silence crackled audibly over the connection. Arna held tightly to Matt's hand. At last, von Feist replied, "Certainly, *Herr Cain*. One way. *Ram them*."

Matt waved, almost as if he thought von Feist could see. "Ram them, crash them, bust up their jets.... I don't care what happens, just as long as we get them out of the sky."

Von Feist began to talk excitedly. "*Ja, Herr Cain... ja... ich werde...*"

Matt slammed down the receiver. Time was up on the catwalk. He leaned over the railing, his face pale.

He said, "Here they come."

Matt grinned, put his arms around Arna, kissing her hard. He was afraid, his stomach was a great yawning void; but he had to show them that they could still fight. Releasing Arna, he shouted with a defiance he didn't feel, "Let them come! We've got more coffins on the way!"

Ragged cheering broke out, splattered on the walls, died.

Matt dialed the central com room. "Get me my brother's flagship." He put down the phone, lit a cigarette and waited.

He jerked around when the buzzer sounded. His hand fastened on the phone, scooping it up. A voice said, "Proceed."

"Well?" It was Marco's voice.

Matt breathed deeply. "Let's finish this, brother."

"The two of us?"

"Yes." Matt laughed jaggedly.

"Just the two of us."

"I can blast you out of the sky. We're coming down on you right now."

"Are you full of fear, brother?" Matt's voice bit and tore. "Are you afraid you can't get ahead of your puny relative?"

There was a long silence. And then Marco began to curse, the words tumbling one upon another, filthy, obscene. At last he said quietly, "Where?"

Matt thought briefly. "A'round on the other side, out in space. Do you know where the warp is?"

"Yes."

"Bring your flagship. I'll bring the *Caliban*. We'll draw along side. Put on a suit and meet me on top of the ship. No firing until...one of us comes back. Agreed?"

"Agreed, you son of—"

"Mutual," Matt whispered and put the phone in its cradle.

"Prepare to accelerate," he called.

"New course. Draw up just outside the attraction field of the warp. I'm going to the upper lock."

Time followed, with Arna. Matt wondered how the other ships were faring. Now it didn't matter. All that mattered was Marco.

IN THE UPPER lock chamber, Matt pulled on his suit. Arna lit a cigarette for him, put it between his lips. The jets stopped coughing. The *Caliban* was silent.

"We're at the warp," Time announced dismally. "What weapons?"

"Just give me a knife."

Time offered his. The blade shone. Matt stuffed it into the voluminous belt. The lights in the ceiling made yellow cones on the floor. Matt stood outside one of the cones, holding his helmet crooked in one arm, blowing smoke into the column of light and watching it twist up and around.

Time's left hand was a dull gleam in the darkness. Arna leaned on his shoulder.

"Friends, Romans and corpses," Matt said suddenly in a loud voice. "The dead man's final speech to his..." He choked. He rubbed his eyes. He lowered his head and said very faintly, "God."

"How will we know what happens?" Time asked, from somewhere in the dark.

"The ships'll be hull to hull," Matt breathed. "Whichever one of us... stays alive... will get back to his ship and order the vortex cannons fired. The other ship... just won't be."

"I see," Time murmured.

There was a soft gentle chunking against the hull.

"Here he is," Time said.

"Well," said Matt with a long sigh.

Hurriedly Arna put her arms around his neck, her lips close to his ear. "Come back, Matt. Remember there's something to come back for."

Matt flipped away his cigarette. It lay in the cone of yellow, still burning. He said, "Marco's got something to come back for, too. Power. That's a lot to come back for."

She pulled away. "Haven't you got anything more?"

He looked at her for a long minute, feeling for the first time in many years that the toughness, the hardness, was gone, and that he was only a child, alone somewhere in a mournful graveyard where the wind twisted the leaves around the tombstones under the swollen moon.

He said, "I wish I knew," and jammed the helmet onto his head, snapping the locks closed. Without looking at either of them, he felt forward. He fumbled for the switch, the ladder rungs, pulled himself up, crawled up into the tiny escape chamber, lay there shivering in the dark

while the air whispered away.

The upper door *spanged* open.

Reluctantly he put his gloved hands on the edge of the opening and lifted. Getting to his feet, he looked around.

The burnished hull of the *Caliban I* stretched downward on each side of him. To his right, flush against his own craft, lay Marco's flagship. The stars were cold eyes, and the day side of Merthor was blackened with smoke and destruction.

To his left lay the warp, an almost tangible circle of blacker black, a hole out of the universe, a gateway to the broken dimensions.

Marco was nowhere to be seen on top of his own ship.

When the attack came, it came suddenly.

A KIND OF animal snarl came through Matt's head phone. He felt an arm holding him from behind slipping around his neck, binding him with horrible strength. There was a ripping sound.

There was a very quiet hiss.

The arm let go. Matt turned around, staring dumbly. Behind Marco's helmet, he could see eyes full of the wolf-luster of hate. Marco waved his knife. The air kept hissing out of Matt's suit.

"You've got fifteen seconds to live," Marco said.

And Matt whispered, "...from behind..."

And Marco laughed.

The air made a roar, like ocean surf at dawn, vanishing and leaving. His body would explode... dead man....

Marco kept on laughing. *Matt, the dead man...*

And then he thought of Arna.

He saw her, quite clearly, in his mind. He started to walk forward. Marco didn't laugh any more. A horrible burning pain ran along Matt's arms. He knew that it was a dead man's final flow of strength.

He took hold of his brother's suit. Marco whimpered crazily, drove his knife forward. It ripped into the suit, made a probe of torture in his side. Marco pulled it all the way out.

He was conscious of a strangeness in his body, as if his soul were chained up and had to be released. It cried and groaned and twisted inside of him. He knew it was only the pressure, the pressure that would blow him into a thousand soggy pieces of bone and blood....

Marco stabbed him in the side a second time. Matt picked him up, with that terrible strength pouring through him. *Arna*, his brain sang, *Arna Arna Arna....*

He held Marco over his head. Marco screamed.

He threw him, outward and forward. Marco clawed the dark air. There was nothing to stop him. Nothing....

And the warp was waiting.

His body fell into that blackness, and seemed to become some insane jigsaw puzzle, with angular planes, Marco torn apart and put back together as a hundred different beings in that empty hole where there were no laws of matter.

And then he was gone and only the warp remained. There was the scream, bouncing back from endless tangential walls of twisted dimensions, and then that, too, vanished.

Matt dropped the knife, heard it clank and slide away. He took a step. His body was expanding, getting monstrously heavy. There was only a faint hiss of air now.

He tried to take another step. The lock was an open square, a few feet away. Another step....

Arna...

He screamed her name. "*Arna... Arna... Arna....*"

Somehow, he pushed across the infinite distances and fell down into the

lock in a tortured heap. He heard the door clanging automatically closed, the air beginning to return. His body seemed to contract.

There was metallic coldness under him. He jerked off the helmet, breathing the thin air, pressing his face against that coldness.

There was blood inside his suit. It was warm. It was rising.

It was an invisible tide, sweeping up over his chest, his shoulders, in the dark. He lay, murmuring her name a thousand times until the warm tide closed over his head and he was drowned.

"HE CAME from behind me," Matt kept repeating.

The Healing Plasters covered the wounds in his side, white plastic strips that would cleanse and repair the ragged cuts made by Marco's knife. He shook his head in a dazed fashion, saw that he was in his cabin, and breathed deeply of the air.

"How long have I been out?" he asked weakly.

"About an hour," Time told him.

Arna's hand moved along his cheek, warm possessive. He touched her fingers, trying to smile.

"He came at me from behind," he said again.

"You told us," Arna said. "You babbled the whole story while we got you down from the airlock."

"Where's his flagship?"

"Still beside us," Time said. "Still waiting for one of you to come back."

Matt struggled to his feet. "Don't..." Arna began. He shoved her hand away roughly.

"There's still a little work to do. Time, is there anybody aboard who can operate a teleporter?"

Time pondered, finally said, "I'm not sure. I'll check." He took the com phone from a small alcove in one wall,

talked quietly for a few moments, then turned around.

"A breed Martian in the galley. Used to be with Morgan's men in Galaxy Six. The Invisible ships...you remember..."

Matt nodded. "Get him up here. Assemble all the men in the locks, fully armed."

Time frowned. "Why?"

"We're taking over Marco's flagship."

Matt stumbled to a closet, selected a cloak and threw it around him.

"Too much strain on the Plasters and they'll break," Arna warned.

Matt kissed her quickly. "Then just pray that they don't break for another half-chron." He swung around and the cloak flapped from his shoulders. "All right, Time, let's go."

The men were crowded in the locks. Matt spoke brief orders into the com phones and the doors of the *Caliban I* opened to reveal other doors. The torch crews began slicing through the metal with silent white beams of heat.

Matt, sword in one hand, blaster gripped in the other, tried to stop the hammers of pain ringing in his skull. But they clanged and beat and echoed like a thousand broken bells.

The doors of Marco's flagship dissolved. Matt swept his blade in the air, and his men plunged into the ship.

They started on the lower decks, with the advantage of surprise. They swept down the metal halls, up the ladders. They opened every door, killed every crewman they found. Little rivers of blood began to run in the passageways.

The engine room...the galley...the arms room...silently they ticked off the conquered sectors. They stalked quietly, killed quietly, a great tide of steel and hatred that swept upward and outward through the iron guts of the ship. Matt was there, and Time,

vengefully slaying...and slaying...
and slaying...

THEY BATTERED down the doors of the chart room. In the center, on a round platform, stood the gigantic bulk of the teleportation unit. A few technicians fired blasters from a balcony. Matt's men spread out and began to pick them off, one by one. Bodies tumbled lazily to the floor, bones snapping with finality.

The room reeked of blaster smell. Matt breathed deeply, Time at his side. The last of the defenders was gone.

And then, from behind a pillar on the catwalk, a blue Mercurial with one arm reared up, half of the other shoulder gone. But his blaster went forward and a beam of force sizzled out.

Time screamed. The metal plate in his skull turned molten. He screamed louder, pulling at the top of his head, trying to quench the tide of fiery dripping hell that ran down his face, burned out his eyes, charred his skin away. He skittered along the floor, bumped against an astrogration table and lay still.

Blasters came up all around the room. The Mercurial, teetering on the edge of the catwalk, aimed at Matt.

Face like a mask of stone, Matt flung his sword. It arched like a shimmering fish through the air and skewered the Mercurial's stomach. He dropped, sagging across the railing with the blade sticking out at the base of his spine, covered with blue ooze.

Matt leaned on one of the tables. His strength was draining away. But he had to stay up...for a little while longer...he prayed to strange blasphemous gods that the Plasters would not break.

The breed Martian, obsequious and servile, reported.

"Stand by the machinery," Matt

said in a deathly whisper. "Orbeck. Somebody get me Orbeck."

The beefy man pushed through the crowd. "Here, sir."

"Take the ship around to the other side of Merthor." Matt sank down onto a stool, looking deep into the red haze before his eyes, as the chemical drive boomed.

Eons later, Orbeck said, "We're twelve miles off."

"Any of Marco's ships still up?"

"About sixty, sir."

Matt nodded. "The suicide crew did their job. Get the coordinates of that warp on the other side."

Orbeck returned from the file in a few minutes. "Now," said Matt, "have that Martian rig the arrival end of the teleporter just inside the field of attraction of the warp."

Again Orbeck went, seemingly through far oceans of dim wavering redness. Again his fat face thrust through the murk. "Done, sir."

"Give me the com phone. Get all those other ships on the hookup."

Someone put the phone into his hand. Matt wondered if he could talk any more.

"You may go ahead, sir," Orbeck whispered.

"This is Cain," Matt said, trying to approximate his brother's voice. "I'm wounded. Assemble before the flagship immediately."

At the observation port, someone yelled, "They're leaving Grab. They're coming this way."

"How is the city?" Matt wondered. He tried to look at his hand, could not find it in that awful red sea.

"Only about a quarter burned," the voice called back.

There were small noises in the redness. Men coughing. The hum of the teleport generators gathering power. Orbeck, talking to someone about Matt. He smiled at that or, at least, smiled inside of himself. He could

barely move.

Orbeck said at last, after infinities, "They're drawn up before us. All of them."

"Teleport them," Matt whispered. "Into the warp."

A BANSHEE whine ran through the ship, like a woman crying out with her mouth wide open. It keened up and up, and abruptly broke off.

"They're gone," Orbeck breathed, returning. "Every last one of them. Gone."

Matt felt relief run through his veins like warm liquor. "Let me see," he whispered. "Lead me to the catwalk..."

"I really don't think you should, sir," Orbeck replied. "The Plasters seem strained...the fibers are full of small cracks."

"Take me to where I can see," Matt said.

Orbeck half lifted, half pushed him up the ladder toward the catwalk. Near the top, Matt threw off his hands, head back, infinitely proud and sick.

"I'll...go...up...alo..."

Someone yelled. Orbeck dodged instinctively. Matt's legs went out from under him. He fell down the ladder and lay on the floor. The Healing Plasters split and the wounds began to bleed again, soaking the white plastic fibers with sticky redness.

"Hurry," Orbeck howled, beefy face flushed. "Get him below. Ship's medic...hurry..."

CHAPTER VI

THE FINAL HONOR

THE SKY was a very bright blue, filled with little puffs of white cloud. Beyond the base, the hills rose, green and shimmering in the wind.

Long lines of men in dress uniform stood at attention all the way down

the field. From somewhere rolled the steady beat of kettledrums.

In the center of the field, the High Commander of Sol, Incorporated nodded to an orderly.

"Captain Vincent Orbeck," the orderly announced. The drums thundered.

Orbeck walked stiffly forward, conscious of his own bulk. His boots drummed on the concrete. He tried to march in time to the drums.

He stopped before the High Commander, feeling awe under the stern gaze, the face like worn leather. The High Commander's scarlet plume danced fitfully in the wind.

The High Commander extended his hand. Orbeck shook it.

"To Galactic Commander Matthew Cain," the orderly read, "is awarded the honorary post of Tri-galactic commander."

He handed a small velvet box to Orbeck. The stern gaze relaxed for a minute. Orbeck watched the sky, squinting.

"Tell me, Captain Orbeck," the High Commander said softly, "why would a man like Matthew Cain do a thing like that?"

"I don't know, sir," Orbeck replied, knowing all along, wishing, somehow, that he could have done the same thing.

"Do you know where he is now?"

Orbeck lifted his eyes to the blue sky and the wind. "Out there, with her. Wherever there's quiet, and perhaps books and wine and no more killing. Just the two of them."

The High Commander smiled thinly and spoke so none of his aides could hear. "Sometimes I think that men like us don't really know what we want, with our cannons and our ships and our desire for more worlds." The smile grew wry. "But then I guess that's why we're here."

"Yes, sir," Orbeck replied, catching

himself a moment later and growing red all over his fleshy face.

"Well," the High Commander said, "I wish them both luck. And if you ever see him, give him the medal, will you?" The Commander indicated the box.

"Yes, sir, I will."

The High Commander stiffened. Orbeck knocked his boots together, faced about smartly and walked back toward the ranks of men. The drums beat. The sky was warm and the wind moved in the green trees beyond the buildings.

Orbeck walked on, away from the High Commander, the box clutched tightly in his hand. He wished terribly

that he could run, tear off his tunic, run away, find a woman like Matt had found one, and live forever in the stars with an end to hunting. But then, he was an officer in Sol, Incorporated.

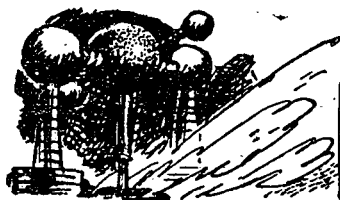
Next in line for Commander of Galaxy Eighteen.

He took up his place in line, about faced. His fingers constricted around the box, Tri-galactic. That might be something else to work for. Not like the woman, the lovely woman...but something.....

He stood among the ranks of men stretching down the concrete.

The kettledrums beat....

THE END



WE'RE IN HOT WATER!

SCIENCE has pushed its frontiers in every direction—except one. It doesn't go far into the bowels of the Earth. While rockets are about ready to conquer space, probing into the ground has been restricted to mines of moderate depth. This is going to change in the near future because of two reasons. One is the natural depletion of our surface resources in minerals and water; the other is that technology is providing the means to probe deeper.

When you consider that gradually the mineral resources, the coal and metal ores, the oil and even the fresh water deposits at the Earth's surface are being exhausted, certainly some effort must be made to replenish them. Fortunately the crust of the Earth is not only incredibly thick—it is inexhaustible with mineral wealth. All that is required is that men go after it. And soon they will.

Recently an engineer and a physicist fired one of the first big guns in this coming campaign to conquer the Earth's crust. Their scheme may be the first one of many to develop the wealth beneath our feet. Peculiarly enough this opening gun is to seek a rather prosaic, taken-for-granted resource—water! Large areas all over the world are being depleted of their water. To obtain fresh water from the sea requires tremendous amounts of heat and is economically unfeasible unless this heat is free. That's where physics and geology combine. This is the crucial fact: fifteen thousand feet down in the ground the tem-

perature is three hundred and sixty degrees Fahrenheit!

Equipment will be built which will permit deep wells or drilling holes to this depth. Perhaps eventually even mine galleries and shafts may be sunk to this level. Regardless of how the depths are attained, ordinary salty ocean water will be pumped to this depth where, under the terrific pressure and heat, it will be turned into superheated water which will be returned to the surface.

As soon as the pressure is released the water turns to steam, which can be condensed free of mineral matter and salt and purer than the most natural streams. Obviously the Earth's crust-heat is endless, so that, if the project develops on a huge scale, water no longer will be scarce anywhere. An interesting by-product is also delivered from the residue of this mammoth distillation process—minerals like sodium, bromine, magnesium and others. In addition, the water will dissolve minerals in the Earth which will provide innumerable varieties.

Through these technological exploits and developments, the future will be molded. The use of the Earth's heat, the Sun's heat and atomic energy have long been dreamed of. Their utilization is very close. The prodigal way in which we spend natural resources requires that we seek new sources. There is only one way—Dimension Underground.

—Walt Crain

DEATH'S DERELICT

By Chester S. Geier

Old Judson told of a metal planet deep in space. But he forgot a few deadly details!



The weapon glittered in her hand as Naleen swung it at the head of her brutish assailant



THE SOUND of swiftly approaching footsteps in the corridor beyond the control room made Larry Regan look up from his book with a quiet, wary alertness. He

straightened in the S-shaped grav-couch, while one hand dropped almost casually to rest on the stat-gun that lay at his side.

Vern Dittmar burst into the control

room, his dark, sharp-boned features twisted in panic and fury. For an instant he glared at Regan, then his hot black eyes leaped to the gauges and indicators on the instrument panel.

"We're decelerating!" he gasped. "And we're further out in space than anyone's ever been before!"

"Don't forget old One-tube Judson," Regan said gently. "He was out here too, you know."

Dittmar ran agitated fingers through his lank black hair. "This is madness—sheer suicide!"

Regan shook his copper-red head. "We're where we started out for. Until you got cold feet and wanted to turn back."

"And I would have, if—" Dittmar broke off and then gritted, "You doped me, Regan!"

The man in the grav-couch shrugged, grinning faintly, a grin that deepened the humor creases at the corners of his wide mouth and his blue eyes. He had a dented nose and a long muscular jaw; he was a big man whose shoulders filled ordinary doorways.

He said quietly: "Dope's a hard word. All I did was slip a sedative into your food. You needed it. You were nervous and upset. And now...well, you've had a nice rest, and we've just about reached the end of our trip."

"It was mutiny!" Dittmar spat. "Mutiny! You'll answer for it when we get back to civilization, Regan. I don't have to remind you that this is my ship, and that I'm in command. You not only violated my orders, but you also mishandled me personally."

REGAN moved his big shoulders. "We had come too far to back out. I'm sure you'll see it that way before much longer."

"Who are you to decide what we should or shouldn't do?" Dittmar demanded. "You're nothing but a cheap

adventurer. A space bum! You came to me with Judson's wild story of having seen a metal planetoid out here, and I was just fool enough to sink a lot of money and time into an expedition. Then, when I decided Judson was nothing but a madman after all—"

Regan broke in, "Old One-tube wasn't a madman, whatever else you could say about him. He knew deep space as damned few of us have yet come to know it. If he said he saw something out here—something out of the ordinary—then it's dead certain he saw something. And he would have known exactly what it was if his low fuel supply hadn't forced him to return to Mars."

"But there's the rumor that Judson died practically raving. I overlooked it at the time, Regan, but now I can see what a fool I was."

The man in the grav-couch shook his copper-red head with a dogged patience. "Old One-tube was calm enough when he sent for me and told me his story. What got him was old age and too much neocol. He'd been out in deep space too long and hadn't taken care of himself as well as he should have."

Dittmar's dark face was stubborn. "That may be true enough, but there's too many other things about this expedition I don't like, Regan. Those two friends of yours that you talked me into taking on as crew, for example. I can see now why you wanted them along: to back your mutiny."

Regan's blue eyes hardened, but in another instant he shrugged and grinned a little. "Can't say I blame you for being worried, Dittmar, but there's no reason to be where I and the others are concerned. I insisted on taking along Blount and Olsen because they're deep space men and don't scare easy. I knew they'd stay on the job wherever we went."

"Trouble with you, Dittmar, is that you were born with too much money. That always draws the wrong kind of people, and it's made you suspicious of everyone. Spacemen are honest; they have to be. The first lesson they learn is that space can't be cheated."

"That's no reason why I should trust you," Dittmar returned sullenly. "I know you covered yourself with a certain amount of glory by having been with the first two expeditions to Jupiter's moons. But you can't deny that you're essentially a space bum, jumping at every easy-looking opportunity that comes along."

"Not because they're easy—and not for money." Regan spoke gently, and there was something of the same gentleness in his eyes as he turned his head to gaze through the control room's curved observation port. Beyond lay a depthless, blazing sea of stars, spreading light years upon countless light years in awesome grandeur. A yearning touched Regan's rugged features as he looked.

"Maybe I am a space bum, Dittmar. But it's because I fell in love with space. I wanted to reach the stars. I jumped at every opportunity that took me a little closer, that took me where other men hadn't been before. There never were enough opportunities. Expeditions cost a terrific amount of money, and the men who had that kind of money weren't spending it unless they expected to get a lot more money in return. There were times when I—"

REGAN broke off startledly as he caught a flicker of motion from the corners of his eyes. Almost too late he swung around to see Dittmar leaping toward him. Only then did he realize how completely he had relaxed his guard. Dittmar had taken advantage of it to launch a sudden attack.

With one hand Dittmar grabbed at the stat-gun, while with the other he swung a wild punch at Regan's jaw. Dittmar's sharp-boned face was desperate and determined. He was slighter in build, but the artificial conditions of gravity that obtained aboard the space yacht gave him a strength and agility he did not ordinarily possess.

Regan was dazed by the punch. He had kept an instinctive grip on the gun, but now he felt it slipping from his fingers as Dittmar struggled to jerk it loose. At the same time he was aware that he was being pulled off the grav-couch by the other's savage efforts.

Regan's thoughts flashed. He knew what plan Dittmar must have in mind. Dittmar hoped to gain the upper hand long enough to force a change in the yacht's course. He couldn't hope to keep control of Regan and the two-man crew for the whole of the return trip to Mars. But once the course was changed, the fuel supply would be too depleted to leave enough for both a second change and the return trip. Regan would be forced to head back. And he didn't want that to happen.

He was half out of the gray-couch now as Dittmar kept jerking his space-lightened weight forward. Thrusting against what little support he had left, he deliberately impelled himself against his opponent.

Dittmar was at once thrown off balance by the combination of his own efforts and Regan's mass. Together they went sprawling in a grotesque, slow-motion fall, twisting and kicking.

Still keeping a clutch on the gun, Dittmar swung savage blows at Regan's face and head. Regan ignored them for the moment. He caught Dittmar's clutching fingers with his free hand and tore them away from the gun. Then with a swift maneuver he

twisted Dittmar's imprisoned arm against the man's back, whirled him around and straddled him face downward. The muzzle of the stat-gun pressed against the nape of Dittmar's head. Cursing breathlessly in pain and rage, Dittmar struggled to break free.

"Calm down, Dittmar!" Regan commanded. "I don't think you want to head back home as badly as all that. You're just in the habit of giving orders instead of taking them. But this is no time to fight over who's going to be boss. We're getting close to—"

Regan tensed as the radar alarm woke into a steady buzzing. Dittmar abruptly grew still.

"There's something ahead of us in space!" Regan said finally. "Something big, if that signal means anything!"

RELEASING Dittmar, he crossed hurriedly to the instrument board. He switched on the scanning screen and adjusted the dials. Dittmar came up to watch silently, his hostility of a moment ago forgotten.

A spherical object took shape in the screen, too distant as yet for details to be discernible. Regan exclaimed in satisfaction.

"There she is! There's your proof, Dittmar—the proof that old One-tube knew what he was talking about."

The other's face held awed wonder. "But what is it, Regan? It looks too perfectly round to be a planetoid."

Regan said slowly, "Old One-tube had an idea about it. He thought the thing might be a ship—and now I'm sure he was right."

"A ship!" Dittmar gasped. "But no ship I've ever seen looked like that. And we're all the way out past the orbit of Jupiter, the only ones beside Judson who ever came this far. Where could a ship like that—?"

"There's only one answer," Regan

said. "It came from Outside—from the stars." He grinned with a fierce eagerness. "An interstellar ship, Dittmar! Now do you understand why I couldn't let anything keep me from getting here?"

Dittmar nodded slowly, his eyes wide. "But, good Lord, if that's actually an interstellar ship, it'll turn our little interplanetary civilization upside down!"

"Not to mention what may be inside of it."

"People?"

"Monsters, most likely."

Dittmar stiffened. "Listen, Regan, if that should be the case, you surely can't have any idea of entering it!"

"With a chance to get my hands on an interstellar ship, I'd be a fool not to," Regan returned. "Anyway, those aboard it are probably dead by now. The ship isn't accelerating or decelerating, just drifting—and Lord only knows how long it's been doing that."

Blount and Olsen entered the control room. Blount was short and thick-set, with wiry red hair; Olsen a big-boned blond man, with square, capable features.

"We heard the alarm, Chief," Blount said. "What is it?"

REGAN explained briefly. He studied the instruments and began feeding data into the calculator. With the figures obtained, he made a readjustment of the yacht's course and speed of deceleration.

Excitement kindled in Olsen's eyes as he watched. "You figuring on boarding the ship, Chief?"

Regan nodded, grinning. "Right. And if the idea scares you silly, you can stay here with Dittmar and twiddle your thumbs."

Blount winked. "You said it, Chief. This is a job for men with guts."

"Who said I was scared?" Olsen

protested. "I'm going along just to keep Blount from falling all over his own feet."

"And I'm going along, too," Dittmar put in. "You can't be thinking of leaving me locked up aboard the yacht, Regan. Suppose you didn't come back?"

Regan shrugged with outward unconcern, but the thought was a sobering one. He realized that an exploration of the alien ship would be accompanied by any number of possible dangers.

"Suit yourself, Dittmar. I had the idea I'd be doing you a favor by leaving you out of this."

The sphere grew in size and detail, becoming a vast, gleaming shape that dwarfed the yacht. It was oddly ribbed from one pole to the other, but its metal surface seemed otherwise unbroken. No observation ports were visible. And if the sphere contained living passengers, these gave no slightest indication that the approach of the yacht had been noticed.

Regan and the others were gathered tensely before the observation port. None spoke, but Regan sensed what was in their minds as they watched. Here was something from beyond the confines of the Solar System, something wonderful and strange. Direct, tangible evidence of another race of civilized, intelligent beings that had somehow drifted across the awesome gulf between the stars.

Regan's wonder sharpened. Could it be that those inside the sphere were still alive after all? What would they look like? Would they be inimical—perhaps unimaginably vicious and deadly?

Regan turned away, the lines of his face tightening. "We'll never get anywhere just looking. Climb into space armor, and we'll go over. But if any of you have changed your minds..."

"Not me, Chief!" Blount said quickly. "Wherever you go is good enough for me."

Dittmar and Olsen nodded agreement.

Regan gestured. "Let's get started then."

THEY MADE swift preparations, gathering and checking equipment, and then climbing into their bulky space armor. Emerging from the yacht's airlock, they used their shoulder rockets to propel themselves across the several meters of distance that separated them from the sphere.

Their magnetized boots held them in contact with the smooth metal hull. The alien vessel curved under them like a diminutive world. Overhead was the vast black sky of airless space, glittering with remote, icy splendor.

"How do we get in?" Blount asked, his voice hardly more than a whisper in his helmet radio. "I haven't seen any sign of an airlock yet."

"There has to be an airlock somewhere," Regan answered. "Spread out and look for it."

The sphere proved to have two airlocks, one at each of the two poles formed by the girdling metal ribs. Regan called the others together at one end of the entrances. This was a circular metal door, approximately seven feet in diameter, a fact that struck Regan as significant. The means of opening the door puzzled him until he noticed a plate of some darker metal set into one edge. He prodded the plate with his glove and was startled as the door immediately swung inward.

He flashed the beam from a torch into the dark orifice that had yawned at his feet. The light revealed a small tube-like chamber, not greatly different from the airlock chambers built by human hands.

There was a heavy stillness. No other motion followed the opening of the door.

"Looks all right," Regan said finally. "Come on."

Unslinging a heavy-duty pyro-projector, he led the way into the chamber. The others followed, gripping weapons of their own.

REGAN found a second plate set into the wall near the edge of the door frame. He pressed this, and the door closed. Invisible machinery hummed softly. Within another few moments Regan noticed that moisture was condensing on his helmet.

"There's air here—air and warmth," he told the others. "And if the air has the right proportion of oxygen in it, that could begin to mean something."

"People like ourselves?" Dittmar asked. His voice held a note of excitement.

"Humanoid, at least," Regan returned. "A race capable of building a ship like this would have to resemble us in bodily structure. The size, design and function of this airlock alone seems to back that up. But we'll find out soon enough."

Excitement was evident in his own voice. He gripped the pyro-projector in tense fingers, his heart pounding.

The humming of the invisible machinery stopped. Turning to the inner door of the airlock, Regan located still another of the dark metal plates. He hesitated a moment before pressing it.

"Here we go! And watch yourselves, all of you. Anything can happen now."

The inner door swung open as Regan pressed the plate. He found himself staring down the length of a corridor at the end of which was a faint radiance. After a moment he started cautiously toward it, noticing as he did so that his movements were swiftly becoming more difficult.

"Gravity!" he whispered. "There's gravity here. And with our heavy space armor, that's going to put us at a disadvantage in case of trouble."

He was breathing with effort when he reached the end of the corridor. As well as he was able to judge, the gravity within the alien sphere was about equal to that on Earth's surface.

The faint radiance he had seen was pouring through a partly open door, beyond which was a greenish obstruction of some sort. He pushed at the edge of the door, but it required the assistance of Blount and Olsen to open it sufficiently to squeeze through.

A YELLOW-WHITE brilliance flooded into the corridor now. Regan stared at it, amazed and incredulous. He heard the startled gasps of Dittmar and the others.

The brilliance looked like—sunlight! And just beyond the widened opening of the door was a heavy crust of broken black soil with a lush growth of tall, vivid green grass!

"What in the name of reason have we walked into?" Regan exclaimed. "This... why, this is impossible! Grass in a space ship!"

Then he was squeezing through the doorway. Not even sight of the grass had been enough to prepare him for the shock of what he saw.

He was looking at what was in all essentials a tiny world—but a world oddly inverted, turned inside out! There was not only grass, but a forest-like growth of shrubbery and small trees. The horizon curved up and around on all sides, details of the vegetation fading into a green blur with distance. And in the precise center of what served as the sky was a ball of yellow-white radiance shedding light and warmth.

Regan had to struggle to assure himself that he wasn't suffering a hallu-

cination. A world in a space ship! A world given wings! It couldn't be real, yet the evidence of his senses told him it was.

The sphere was completely hollow, he realized, except for a layer against the hull which no doubt would contain the propulsion devices and other machinery. Instead of compartments and passageways, the sphere contained what was in effect a large-scale terrarium. Regan abruptly decided that nothing could have been more appropriate on a long journey between the stars. People—human or otherwise—grew homesick for the soil that gave them birth. How could that homesickness be better prevented than by taking the soil along, making it a part of life aboard ship?

REGAN heard the astonished cries of the others as they came crowding behind him. Then Dittmar was pointing in suddenly redoubled excitement.

"Over there—look! Buildings!"

Regan peered in the indicated direction, and then he saw them, a distant cluster of rectangular white shapes, half hidden by the intervening expanse of lush vegetation. Unconsciously, he had expected something of the sort. Buildings, of course, would heighten the illusion of life under normal planetary conditions.

"I must be crazy," Olsen muttered. "A sun, grass, houses—all inside a ship!"

"Knowing you like I do," Blount returned, "I'd say you were crazy—if I didn't see the same thing."

Dittmar asked, "What are you going to do now, Regan?"

"Investigate those buildings. But first I'll find out if it's safe to remove our armor. Otherwise we'd have a tough time wading through all this shrubbery."

Regan loosened an instrument case

from its fastenings on his armor. He busied himself for some minutes with a variety of devices.

"There's oxygen here all right," he reported. "And nitrogen and carbon dioxide. The percentages and the air pressure are roughly Earth-normal. No other gases that might be dangerous, as far as I can tell. A trace of radioactivity, but not enough to be harmful. Temperature's a little over eighty degrees. Everything looks all right, but I'll strip first just to make sure."

Regan unfastened his helmet and swung it back. The air smelled fresh and tangy with the mingled odors of grass and moist soil. The miniature sun touched his face gently. He could detect nothing suspicious in the fragrances he breathed. His bodily responses remained normal.

Finally he nodded at the others and began removing his armor. They followed suit, leaving all immediately unnecessary equipment in the corridor that led back to the airlock.

With a foot Regan shoved the door back to its original, slightly ajar position. A thick crust of soil and grass covered it, making it practically unnoticeable to any save those who knew where to look. He marked the spot with a page torn from a notebook and thrust flag-like on the sharp end of a broken branch.

"That's that," he said. "Let's go."

THEY STARTED toward the distant white buildings, their weapons held with wary alertness. Muted pipings and twitterings were audible now, and small winged creatures that resembled birds fled from their approach. Here and there in the undergrowth they caught glimpses of furry, rabbit-like things, and once a tiny, graceful fawn-like shape leaped away into hiding with a frightened crashing of branches.

Equally startled, Regan barely managed to keep himself from firing. His nerves were drawn to tightwire tautness. The grim expressions of Dittmar and the others reflected his own inward strain.

The buildings grew larger, and their perspective shifted. Looking upward at them now instead of downward, as he had done when further back along the concave surface, Regan discovered that they were enclosed within a wall. He was puzzling over the purpose of the wall, when he heard voices directly ahead of him through the intervening vegetation. Voices—and the sound of soft laughter.

He froze, an amazed wonder flashing through him. There was a nostalgically familiar quality about that laughter. But it couldn't be, he told himself. It was impossible!

Then his eyes caught a flicker of bright motion behind gaps in the foliage. Instantly, with a warning gesture to the men beside him, he dropped into concealment.

"That sounded like a woman's voice!" Dittmar whispered, crouching on hands and knees.

Regan nodded. "I thought I was out of my head for a moment, but if you heard it, too—"

Abruptly, Olsen clutched at Regan's arm, pointing. Regan stared. A short distance away a group of hairy, ape-like shapes was moving diagonally through the undergrowth—moving, Regan realized, toward the half-glimpsed figures from which the soft laughter had come.

HIS THOUGHTS whirled. There were living people within the sphere after all—people humanoid in appearance. But he was somehow disappointed. The soft laughter had made him hope for something more.

The ape-like beings were fully as

tall as men, powerfully muscled and covered with shaggy, reddish-brown hair. They gripped spears and heavy clubs. There was something stealthy and threatening about their movements as they approached the figures ahead. In another moment the undergrowth swallowed them.

"I don't like the looks of those boys," Regan muttered. "They're up to trouble of some sort."

"Well, let's find out just what," Dittmar suggested.

"Come on, then." Regan warily started forward, moving from one patch of concealment to another.

With chilling suddenness, a scream rose—a scream that to Regan seemed unquestionably feminine. It was a signal for pandemonium. Shouts and growls followed it in a savage uproar.

Regan broke into a run. As he reached a small clearing in the lush, green growth, he found himself gazing at a wild battle. The ape-like creatures had thrown themselves upon a small group of brightly dressed figures radically different in form and feature. Stunned surprise filled Regan as he realized he was looking at people who in all physical respects were undeniably human!

Two were women and four were men. All were handsome and superbly proportioned, dressed in brightly colored, draped garments that fell to the knees. The men held long cylindrical weapons that flashed noiselessly when fired, but these seemed not to have been effective enough to hold off the attackers. A hand to hand struggle was now taking place as the ape-like creatures, with their greater numbers, closed in.

IN THE confusion of hairy bodies and swirling draperies, Regan caught a glimpse of vivid red-gold hair and shapely white limbs. One of the

two women was fighting off capture by an ape man. A shorter edition of the cylindrical weapons glittered in her hand as she swung it club-fashion at the head of her assailant. She was somehow magnificent, determined rather than terrified, her slender figure writhing and twisting with surprising strength.

Admiration for her leaped in Regan. This girl from the stars had courage as well as beauty, a courage that drew him with an irresistible appeal.

Momentarily she broke free, her draperies almost completely torn away by the clutching hands of the ape man. She was a darting white shape, her red-gold hair tumbling about her naked shoulders. But in the press of bodies her path to escape was blocked. In another instant her pursuer caught her again.

There was a bestial eagerness about the ape man that filled Regan with sudden fury. Leaping from the concealing vegetation, he plunged toward the struggle.

The figures of the attackers and their victims were too closely packed to permit use of the pyro-projector. Regan swung the weapon like a club at the nearest ape men in his path. Two went down before they were fully aware of his presence. Then the others were whirling toward him with startled growls.

There was an interval of frozen quiet. The eyes of the sphere's inhabitants, both ape and human, widened with amazement on Regan. For a moment he must have seemed to them a supernatural being that had materialized from the very air itself.

Regan's gaze was on the girl with the red-gold hair. Seen at closer quarters, she looked even lovelier than she had first appeared. Her delicate features were exotic in cast, and her skin had a warm golden tinge. She was

staring at him in a mixture of bewilderment and half hopeful appeal, as though, in spite of his strangeness, she saw in him the only remaining possibility of rescue.

REGAN had no intention of disappointing her. His purpose must have been clearly evident in his bearing, for the girl's hairy captor released a warning growl and thrust her partly behind him.

Lips twisting in a thin, fierce grin, Regan deliberately moved forward. The ape man seemed unwilling to release the girl, evidently fearing she would elude him if he gave his full attention to Regan. He kept a clutch on her wrist with one hand and with the other brought his club down in a vicious swing at Regan. And as the ape man flashed into action, those of his companions not already joined in battle began converging on Regan from all sides.

Raising the pyro-projector in both hands as though it were a single stick, Regan caught and deflected the club's whistling descent. In almost the same motion he smashed the barrel of his own weapon down on the ape man's head.

As the creature sprawled inertly to the grassy floor, Regan swung to block off the girl from further danger. She flashed him a brief smile, still a little bewildered by him, yet radiating gratitude and trust. The smile hit him like a bolt of energy, sending a tingle through him that he felt clear down to his insteps.

The other ape men were sweeping forward in a hairy wave. But even as they came Regan heard familiar voices shouting encouragement, and over the bobbing, squat heads he saw the figures of Dittmar, Blount and Olsen as they came leaping forward. Then Regan found himself the focus of a snarl-

ing, grunting mass of sub-human fury.

Clubs slashed at him, taloned fingers clutched at his arms and shoulders. Whirling and ducking with whip-lash swiftness, he flailed about him with the projector. Grunts of pain rose from the ape-like figures directly before him, and two fell in quick succession, tripping several of the others.

THEN A club glanced from his head, momentarily dazing him, and the projector was torn from his hands. He went down under the impact of a hairy body. Brutal fingers were seeking his throat as he instinctively kicked and twisted. He broke partly free. A beetle-browed, anthropoidal face loomed in front of him. He threw his fist at it with an explosive surge of strength. The ape man's head snapped back, and he toppled limply forward.

Regan thrust the hairy form aside and surged to his feet. Dittmar, Blount and Olsen had now reached the scene, drawing the attention of the remaining ape men. Swinging fists and clubbed weapons, they were even now forcing their brutish adversaries to give ground.

But as Regan watched, Dittmar stumbled over a sprawled body and fell to hands and knees. Instantly one of the ape men swung up his club for a crushing blow.

Regan leaped forward. He caught the ape man's shoulder and whirled him around. Before the creature fully realized what was happening, Regan's fist hammered into its face. It reeled backward, falling over Dittmar's bent shape to lie in a motionless huddle.

Dittmar climbed back to his feet, breathing hard. "Thanks, Regan. Another moment and that thing would have finished me."

"We'll need each other's help before this business is over with," Regan returned.

He glanced around swiftly. Blount and Olsen were being assisted by two of the original group of four men. Only a handful of the ape-like denizens of the sphere remained in action, but as Regan and Dittmar returned to the battle these turned in flight, joining injured companions who already had retreated to the edge of the clearing. The hairy shapes vanished amid the undergrowth.

Regan looked around anxiously for the girl with the red-gold hair. She stood at one side of the clearing with her arms around the other girl, whose slender shoulders were shaking with muffled sobs.

Regan approached slowly, feeling suddenly awkward and uncertain. The girl with the red-gold hair watched him, smiling in what unmistakably was gratitude, though still puzzled by the mystery he presented.

"I hope you're all right," Regan said, hoping his tone of voice would be understandable even if his words were not.

THE GIRL hesitated, then gravely inclined her small head. She spoke a few melodiously liquid syllables in a language as meaningless to Regan as he knew his had been to her. She indicated the weeping girl at her side, then pointed toward one of the two men of her own race who had fallen in the fight. He lay face down in the grass, the back of his head matted with blood, obviously dead of a fatal wound.

Regan nodded to indicate both his understanding and his sympathy. A thought suddenly struck him, and he touched his chest with a forefinger.

"Larry Regan," he said. "Do you get it, beautiful? That's my name—Larry Regan."

"Lah-ree Ree-gan?" the girl with the red-gold hair echoed in wonder. Ab-

ruptly she smiled and pointed to herself. "Naleen." Then she pointed to the other girl. "Evanee."

Regan was grinning his satisfaction when Dittmar came up with Blount and Olsen and the two remaining male members of Naleen's group. Regan introduced his own companions, and Naleen's were identified as Druvan and Tronnis.

Dittmar, Regan noticed, while impressed by Naleen's beauty, seemed especially interested in Evanee. Dittmar evidently found some quality in the girl of particular appeal to his own nature. Slighter than Naleen and with hair of a lighter golden shade, Evanee possessed an exotic loveliness almost fully as striking.

As Regan groped for some further means of communication, a harsh call lifted the undergrowth in the direction taken by the ape men. It was answered distantly.

Naleen stiffened and spoke swiftly to Druvan and Tronnis. Then she caught at Regan's arm with an urgent gesture.

"Looks like our hairy friends are calling up reinforcements," Regan told Dittmar and the others. "The girl wants to clear out. We'll go along and see if we can learn more about the set-up here."

"That's perfectly all right with me," Dittmar returned. He was gazing at Evanee again.

Blount grinned at Olsen. "Maybe we can find ourselves some girls, too, eh?"

Olsen nodded his blond mane. "And if they're like the ones I've seen so far, we'd better not waste any time."

CARRYING the two fallen men—the other of whom was alive, though badly injured—they set out at a hurried pace for the white buildings, which now were not far distant

along the sphere's oddly inverted surface.

The calls of the ape men sounded louder and nearer. Realizing that pursuit was close at hand, Regan dropped back with Dittmar to cover the rear of the group.

"Those overgrown monkeys didn't like our popping up and ruining their little party," Regan muttered, his features somberly reflective. "They seem to be calling all hands on deck this time and it might mean the internal situation here is building up for real trouble."

Dittmar nodded. "We walked into something all right. Not that I'm sorry, Regan. What puzzles me, though, is how Evanee's people and the monkey men could have been thrown together in a place like this."

"There must be a logical explanation for it," Regan returned. "The close physical resemblance between the people here and ourselves, for example, could be explained on the basis of parallel evolution. In the vastness of the universe the conditions that exist on Earth must have been duplicated more than once, and it was more to be expected than otherwise that on at least one of those duplicate worlds a race identical to ours would evolve."

The wall surrounding the cluster of white buildings began looming up through the luxuriant vegetation. As Naleen and the others in the lead approached a gateway in the wall, a group of people emerged and hurried forward. Regan and his companions at once became the focus of amazed yet friendly curiosity.

Within minutes Regan was forced to cut the welcome short. Faint growls and the crackling of branches warned that the pursuing ape men were dangerously close. Gesturing to make his meaning clear, he issued swift commands and herded Naleen and her people through the gateway and behind the protection of the wall. He stood guard with Dittmar until the last had

gone through.

A band of ape men burst from the undergrowth several yards away. At sight of Regan and Dittmar they halted, growling angrily and darting hungry glances toward the open gateway. They seemed to respect the prowess of these two warriors out of nowhere, yet they were enraged that any obstacle should stand between them and the goal of their desires.

ABRUPTLY their hesitation ended. With savage bellows, four of the band leaped toward Regan and Dittmar across the intervening space.

Naleen, watching from the gateway, cried out in frightened concern.

Regan met the charge with a quick blast from the pyro-projector. The pencil-thin beam of flame cut through one of the ape men like a hot knife through butter, shearing the creature almost in two across the chest, then swung to decapitate a second.

In almost the same instant Dittmar's stat-gun made its sharp, coughing noise and another of the ape men halted as suddenly as if it had hit an invisible wall. The weapon operated on the principle of hydrostatic shock, firing a tiny pellet with such enormous velocity that the impact was sufficient to cause a kind of internal explosion.

The remaining ape man whirled frantically and bounded after his companions as they leaped back into the undergrowth. There were sounds of a hurried retreat, quickly dying away.

Regan joined Naleen and the others within the wall, and the heavy gate swung shut. The girl touched his arm with a grave smile, evidently relieved that he had emerged unharmed from his skirmish with the ape men.

For a moment he had an odd feeling—a feeling that he had arrived safely home after a long time and many dangers. It was a feeling he liked.

Beside Naleen stood a powerfully built man with hair like polished brass

under a spiral-shaped headpiece—an official of some sort, Regan decided. The man glanced from Naleen to Regan with coldly thoughtful blue eyes, his thin lips pressed into an almost invisible line. There was something harsh and fanatical about him, together with a definite suggestion of restrained hostility.

Naleen indicated the man and said, "Worzal." Her own attitude spoke of little friendliness toward the icy-faced official.

Worzal bent his head in acknowledgement toward Regan, his measuring gaze resting for an instant on the pyro-projector. Turning back to Naleen, then, he spoke a few curt words and stalked away.

THE GIRL glanced after him, frowning a little. Then she smiled abruptly and touched Regan's arm. She spoke in her melodiously liquid language and led the way through the crowd of onlookers. These left no doubt of their friendliness, cheering and calling out in welcome as Regan and the others passed.

Regan noted that the inhabitants of the tiny walled village numbered well under a hundred. Without exception they were a handsome people, alert-featured and neat, dressed in the brightly colored draped garments he had already seen worn by Naleen and her companions.

The village itself consisted of slightly over a dozen buildings. These were single-storied and classically simple in design, constructed of some opaque white substance resembling glass or plastic. The buildings looked fragile; since their obvious purpose was to afford privacy rather than shelter from elements which were non-existent here.

Naleen ushered Regan and the other men into one of the buildings. This was larger than the others and occupied a central position in the village,

which tended to confirm Regan's growing certainty that Naleen was someone of importance among her people.

In the building Naleen issued orders, which were followed by swift preparations. The result was a kind of banquet, attended by the family heads among the villagers. Worzal also was present, glowering and aloof. The remaining inhabitants of the village gathered about outside, their excited voices forming a backdrop for the interior festivities.

Regan realized that the arrival of himself and the others was a momentous event to these people. He suddenly found himself wanting to do something for them, if only to justify the attention he was receiving.

He was plied with eager questions as the villagers attempted to satisfy their curiosity regarding his dramatic materialization within their tiny world. But his efforts to explain, limited to gestures and drawings, seemed to convey little meaning. The villagers evidently could not grasp the important point, which was that an "outside" existed beyond the sphere. To them the inside *was* the outside. Their viewpoint had inverted as the result of their inverted environment.

NALEEN finally indicated to Regan that she intended to do something about the language handicap. She led him to another room of the building and opened a door in the floor. A dark passageway ran from here to the space between the sphere's interior and the hull.

As the girl disappeared into the passageway, Regan was startled by an unexpected phenomenon—for in the darkness her draperies glowed with a ghost-like phosphorescence. This, he realized in the next instant, was no doubt due to some property of the dye

that gave the fabric its color. The brightness of the garments worn by Naleen and her people had struck him as somehow unusual even in full illumination, but the reason had not become apparent until now.

Naleen took Regan's hand and drew him after her, until presently she switched on lights. The sphere's "subterranean" layer was divided into compartments, and these, as Regan previously had guessed, contained various sorts of machinery. The compartment that proved to be Naleen's destination was walled with what looked to Regan like the panels of a cybernetic device. In the middle of the floor was an operator's console and a number of light chairs.

Regan took a chair beside the girl and watched as her slim fingers manipulated various dials and switches. Signals flashed, and a small screen on the console lit up. Regan found himself looking at the picture of a building.

Pointing to the picture, Naleen spoke a single word. It was immediately evident to Regan that she was naming in her language the object portrayed. Then she pressed a switch and picked up a small disk-shaped instrument—obviously a microphone. She pointed to the picture again and then to Regan.

"Building," he said.

She nodded quickly, flashed him a smile, and changed the picture.

"Man."

PICTURE followed picture in the little screen. The process continued for some time—and was repeated on subsequent visits. Regan realized he was supplying the device with a vocabulary and grammar of his language. And the purpose of this swiftly became clear, for when Naleen now spoke into the microphone her words were trans-

lated by the device and issued from a speaker in the equivalent of Regan's. His own words, on the other hand, issued in the equivalent of Naleen's. Thus they became able to speak to each other with a quickness and understanding that would not otherwise have been possible.

"The machine can be adjusted so that the pictures are accompanied by both writing and speech," Naleen told Regan. "It was in this way that I learned to read the records of my people. They have forgotten a great deal of knowledge, you see. Today there are many—like Worzal—who refuse to believe that this is not a world but a vessel built to cross the vast spaces between the stars. Even the captains came to know little more than the operation of the machines necessary to maintain living conditions here. I am the first captain to begin learning all the things my people once knew."

"That," he said, "must mean they've been traveling in the ship for a long time."

She nodded. "Originally we were part of a colonizing expedition to new star systems, hundreds of light-years distant. Since many generations were to pass before the trip was completed, the vessel was designed to duplicate natural planetary conditions. This was intended to protect the health and morale of the passengers, and to ease the transition between life aboard ship and life on a planet.

"But the arrangement seems to have been more comfortable than was wise. Machines attended to almost every need, and little knowledge or effort was required. The passengers gradually became ignorant and superstitious. A priesthood arose which taught worship of the machines and of the artificial sun which provides light and warmth within the sphere. The priesthood gained power, until today, with

Worzal as its leader, it has chosen to resist my own authority as captain."

NALEEN'S small face turned bitter. "I wanted to teach my people the old knowledge before their ignorance brought disaster. I wanted them to understand the true nature of the sphere and of the machines. But Worzal saw in my efforts a threat to his own power and called my teachings false and blasphemous. I suspect he may even have gone so far as deciding to rid himself of me. Through his priestly office he has traffic with the chief of the ape men—as you, Larry, have termed them—and thus it is quite possible that he planned for the creatures to capture me."

"How do the ape men happen to be within the sphere with your own people?" Regan asked. "Where did they come from?"

Naleen moved her slim shoulders. "They simply were born among us. It is something I have not been able to understand."

Regan said thoughtfully, "There are unknown radiations in space that often have strange effects on human beings. It's possible that the sphere passed through an area of such radiations. These seem to have caused mutations among your people that resulted in the ape men."

"That must be the answer," Naleen said. "At any rate, my people tried to tolerate the ape men, but the creatures proved too quarrelsome and brutal. We were forced to drive them away, and then to erect a wall around the village to protect ourselves from their attacks." She shuddered a little. "What they mainly seek is women. For some reason, few women of their own kind are born among them."

"Well, they've just been taught a good lesson," Regan returned. "They'll think carefully before they come near

the village again."

Naleen shook her red-gold head in foreboding. "That would be true, if it were not for Worzal. Your coming was a defeat for him, since it proved to my people what I have been trying to teach all along and what Worzal has been trying to deny—that there is an outside to the sphere. For that reason Worzal hates you and will seek to harm you and your friends. He has attempted to turn the people against you, but has failed. Only the ape men can now serve as tools, and they do his bidding out of fear for his priestly powers."

Regan's face was grim. "Something will have to be done about Worzal, then...."

LATER, REGAN told Dittmar and the others what he had learned regarding the history of the sphere's inhabitants, both human and ape-like.

Naleen sat on the grass beside Regan, watching his face as he spoke. With Dittmar was Evanee, who had forgotten her earlier grief sufficiently to return a growing share of his own interest. Blount and Olsen had each been captivated by a girl among the villagers, with the result that both had become more sober and reflective about life.

"I think the time has come for us to decide what we're going to do," Regan finished. "We could, for example, turn the sphere over to our own people. But that would likely cause more harm than good. This is an interstellar ship, remember, and it would most certainly touch off a fight about who would be first to get the secret of its drive. Empires have fallen for less reason. Our people will be better off if they discover interstellar flight in their own way, in their own time.

"Besides, Naleen and her people have something to say about having

their own property turned over to another race—even a race like their own. Naleen feels that her people wouldn't fit in with our sophisticated and high-gear culture. She feels that the change in living conditions would be too drastic for them and leave them bewildered and miserable. She wants them to learn the knowledge they've forgotten and build a future of their own, in which their chances for happiness will be greater."

Regan spread his hands. "That leaves us with two choices. One is that we can leave here and keep our mouths shut about what we saw, so people won't think we're just plain crazy—either because of what we claim we saw, or because we let it get away from us."

DITTMAR looked at Evanee and was silent. Blount and Olsen shifted in sudden discomfort, avoiding Regan's eyes.

"The other choice," Regan went on, "is that we can stay with these people and do something we've always wanted to do—go off on the greatest adventure any of us could ever have. We could be the first men of our race to visit the stars! It would be a long trip, but conditions here are ideal. Even living in a palace on Earth could hardly be as pleasant. We have everything here a man could ask for, every comfort and luxury.

"Naleen and her people want us to stay, of course. In fact, they expect us to. We could be of enormous help to them, even get them settled on some habitable planet among the nearer stars. We wouldn't have any trouble operating the machinery here. The scientific principles of Naleen's people are identical to our own, though applied in ways we're only just getting around to. The design and function of most of the machines, in fact, is as

much like that of our own as Naleen's people are like ourselves. I've studied the controls of the sphere, and basically they aren't any different than those aboard the yacht."

"The yacht," Dittmar said suddenly. "What would we do with it if we went off with these people, Regan?"

"Tow it out to the edge of the Solar System and put it into an orbit," Regan answered. "We could then enter the co-ordinates of the orbit in the sphere's mechanical brain, together with the co-ordinates of our sun. Then later we could come back and use the yacht to pay old Earth a sort of anonymous visit—with our families, of course."

He glanced at Dittmar, then at Blount and Olsen. "Well, what's your choice going to be? As for mine, I'm staying. I've always wanted to reach the stars, and this is my chance." He sent a grin toward Naleen. "Not that there aren't certain other attractions."

"The same goes for me, Chief—both ways," Blount said. "All I want to know is, when do we start?"

"Start?" Olsen snorted. "Me, I'm practically on my way to the nearest star right now!"

Dittmar said slowly, "Naturally I'm going along too. All this has come to mean a great deal to me. For the first time I've found a purpose in life—and the courage to follow it to the end, whatever happens. Because of certain misunderstandings that existed between us, Regan, I want you to understand that."

Regan nodded. "Our differences were wiped out a long time ago, Dittmar, and I'm glad to have you with us. Since the matter is settled, all we have to do now is make plans for—"

A SUDDEN outbreak of frightened screams and shouts somewhere in the village made Regan cut his words

short. He leaped to his feet, listening as the uproar swiftly grew in volume.

"Sounds as if the ape men are up to something again," he said at last. He whirled to Blount and Olsen. "Better get our weapons out of the house. I have an idea we're in for serious trouble."

In another moment a man from the village came running forward over the grass. He spoke swiftly to Naleen, horror and despair evident in his tones.

The girl caught at Regan's arms, blurting an explanation in the few words she had learned from him. "Worzal—he opened the gate! Ape men come!"

Dread sent a chill through Regan. He had known Worzal represented a real danger to himself and the others, but he hadn't expected that the high priest would take such a drastic step.

With an effort he smiled reassurance at Naleen, indicating the man from the village. "Tell him—all the people here. Women and children inside the house. Men to form a wall around them." He emphasized his meaning with descriptive gestures.

Naleen grasped the plan immediately, relaying it to the villager. He nodded and hurried away.

Blount and Olsen came running from the house. Both were empty handed, their features queerly drawn.

"Our guns are gone, Chief!" Blount gasped. "Somebody's taken them!"

Regan swore softly. "It must have been Worzal, damn him! But—he doesn't have us licked yet. Listen! I've ordered everybody here. The idea is to organize them, with the men forming a wall to protect the women and children. Dig up weapons of some sort—anything. We've got to work fast."

Regan knew the strategy would be only part successful. If the ultimate capture and destruction of the village

were to be prevented, he would have to think up a more effective plan of action.

A sick fury grew in Regan. He couldn't lose now, not when the stars lay just within reach, not when Naleen had come to mean so much. Somehow Worzal's diabolically crafty maneuver had to be defeated. The ape men had to be driven away before they caused irreparable damage.

BUT WHAT was there he could possibly do in what little time remained? Groping desperately for some solution, his glance touched the tiny sun at the sphere's center. In the next instant he recalled something Naleen had told him during their conversations through the medium of the mechanical brain. Among everything else, it seemed, the sphere contained machines to generate polarizing rays, which could blanket the sun's light to produce an effect of darkness. The machines were once used to create night and day within the sphere, but according to Naleen they had not been used for many generations. Yet, evidently, they were still in working order.

A sudden hope surging in him, Regan caught at Naleen's shoulders. "The sun, Naleen—the sun! We've got to cut off its light. Make darkness. Do you understand? Darkness!"

He pointed at the tiny brilliant orb, then closed his eyes and made groping motions.

Naleen stared at him a moment, puzzled, and he had a feeling of despair as he thought of the precious seconds that would be lost in making her understand. But abruptly her small face cleared. She nodded and gestured toward the house.

"Come, Lah-ree!"

"You take charge out here until I come back," Regan told Dittmar. "I've

got a plan that might pull us out of this mess. I don't know if it will work, but it's worth trying."

Dittmar nodded swiftly. "Make it work, Regan. Otherwise everything is ruined."

Gripping Naleen's hand, Regan hurried into the house and through the trapdoor that led into the sphere's subterranean layer. Naleen switched on lights as she guided him down a long passageway. Finally they reached a large compartment in which the gleaming bulks of several huge generators were grouped around a control console.

The girl studied an operating diagram set into the console top, then pressed a series of studs. A deep humming sound filled the compartment. Watching a row of indicators, she next turned a number of dials.

At last, flushed with excitement, she turned back to Regan. "We go, Lah-ree. We see darkness."

"You've done it, then?" Regan exclaimed. "Good girl! All right, let's go."

THEY SWUNG around to the doorway—and froze rigidly. Worzal stood there, a powerful and implacable shape, his stern, fanatical features twisted with malevolence.

Regan fought back his stunned surprise. Somehow, he realized, Worzal had followed them here. The high priest evidently had spied on them, to see what their reaction would be to the attack by the ape men. In the confusion of the raid he had gone unnoticed, had been able to slip into Naleen's house without being discovered. And now—

It was obvious that Worzal intended to undo their plan to defeat him.

The high priest spat swift words at Naleen, and Regan heard the girl's choked cry of protest. Then Worzal's

hand rose deliberately. Regan found himself looking into the muzzle of a stat-gun. And even as he looked, Worzal fired.

Worzal's first burst missed as the result of his unfamiliarity with the weapon. The recoil jarred his arm out of line. Before he could set himself again, Regan leaped across the compartment and threw himself in a reckless dive at Worzal's knees.

They hit the floor of the passageway in a hard knot of arms and legs. Worzal kicked violently as he sought to free himself. A lashing foot struck Regan's head, dazing him. Instantly Worzal twisted away, and the weapon in his hand rose with lethal purpose.

Regan saw the movement and recognized his danger. He lunged frantically and caught Worzal's wrist. The burst from the stat-gun flashed ceilingward, and then they were rolling back and forth over the floor in a silent, savage struggle for possession of the weapon.

Worzal heaved and kicked with insensate fury, seeking to break Regan's grip. With his free hand he raked at Regan's face, gouged at Regan's eyes. Then his powerful fingers fastened on Regan's throat and squeezed viciously.

Regan felt his breath being shut off. His resistance against Worzal's imprisoned wrist began to ebb. With a kind of crystalline clarity of vision, he saw the muzzle of the stat-gun swing toward him again, saw Worzal's finger tighten on the trigger.

At the crucial instant he put his ruse into full effect. Surging against Worzal's wrist with his last reserves of strength, he turned the stat-gun around.

The burst from the weapon hit Worzal full in the face.

The high priest became a limp weight in Regan's hands as his head

literally exploded. Gratefully drawing air into his tortured lungs, Regan pulled himself erect. Then Naleen was pressing herself against him, sobbing her relief.

After a moment he drew the girl away, grinning down at her. "I'm all right. Let's get out of here and see how the others are getting along."

He paused to retrieve the stat-gun from Worzal's lifeless fingers. Then he and Naleen were hurrying back along the passageway.

They emerged from the house into a noisy, tumultuous darkness. A number of torches had been lit showing a crowd of Naleen's people around the building.

FOR A SECOND Regan thought the attack was still in progress. Then he realized that the sounds he heard were unmistakably human shouts of triumph. And as more torches were lit he saw that the battle had ended. The ape men were nowhere in evidence.

Dittmar pushed his way forward, grinning broadly. "Your plan seems to have worked, Regan. But you missed the fun. There's something about the clothing worn by these people that makes them shine in the dark. And when the light from the sun was cut off, the ape men were scared silly. No doubt they thought it was magic of some sort—or that everyone in the village had turned into ghosts."

"I was counting on that," Regan said. "At the very least, I hoped the darkening of the sun would scare them away."

"Well, they won't bother us again," Dittmar went on. "And not so much because of your plan, Regan. You see, the ape men evidently don't have the resistance to disease of the people here. They caught something from us, and it seems to have started an epidemic among them. They weren't able to put

up much of a fight, and several died right in the village without so much as having been touched."

"Maybe that's the best solution after all," Regan decided soberly. "The differences between us were too big to have been worked out." He turned as Blount and Olsen came hurrying up.

"Everything's under control, Chief!" Blount announced. "Now we can get ready for our trip."

"Yes, now we can get ready," Regan's arm tightened around Naleen, and his eyes lifted, seeking in memory the stars that lay beyond the sphere's hull.

He knew he had sought and found more than the stars. Like the sphere itself, he was no longer an aimless wanderer. He had found a destination in life, as the sphere would find one in space....

THE END



THE WORKERS toward the great Dream—rockets into space—know that some day the rocket propelled by nuclear energies will be a reality. But this does not seem to be in the immediate future. Consequently, chemical rockets using liquid fuels are almost certainties in Man's initial penetration of space. Since most of the metallurgical and theoretical problems posed by rocket flight have been solved, only one remains—developing a suitable fuel.

The chemical rocket fuels have been well classified and exploited. Many organic compounds ranging from liquid alcohol through compounds of nitrogen to hydrogen have been considered. The oxidizing agent has always been taken to be liquid oxygen, but recently the proposal was made to use liquid ozone. Ozone is a tri-atomic molecule of oxygen, O-three, which makes it really

a concentrated form of oxygen compared with the conventional O-two. The Germans, who were working on rockets with which to bombard New York in the closing days of the second World War, tried very hard to work with ozone—without complete success.

Liquid ozone is a difficult material to handle, not only because of its low temperature but also because it is extremely liable to spontaneous explosion. The cause of this sensitivity appears to be impurities. The slightest taint of non-agreeable materials—and blooey!—the ozone goes up with a tremendous bang. Interest has been renewed in refining this liquid because it is so much more potent than ordinary oxygen and so much more can be done with it. The Moon is coming that much nearer because liquid ozone is in the cards for rocket fuel!

—Tom Lynch

STICK TO IT! *By Dave Long*

"ANAEROBIC PERMAFIL" sounds like a strange jumble of syllables but is in fact the name of an important new substance about which we'll be hearing a lot more. It is a substance which remains liquid as long as air is bubbling through it; or, in the form of a film, it remains liquid as long as it is exposed to air! These unique properties are the exact opposite of those of paint or varnish or other familiar coating agents. The use of the substance can, of course, be easily seen.

First, it makes an excellent leak detector for, while buried in the item which is leaking, it is solid. The minute it touches air it liquefies and thus spots the leak point. As a sealer it will be perfect.

Its most obvious, and possibly its most important, use will be as a cement or glue.

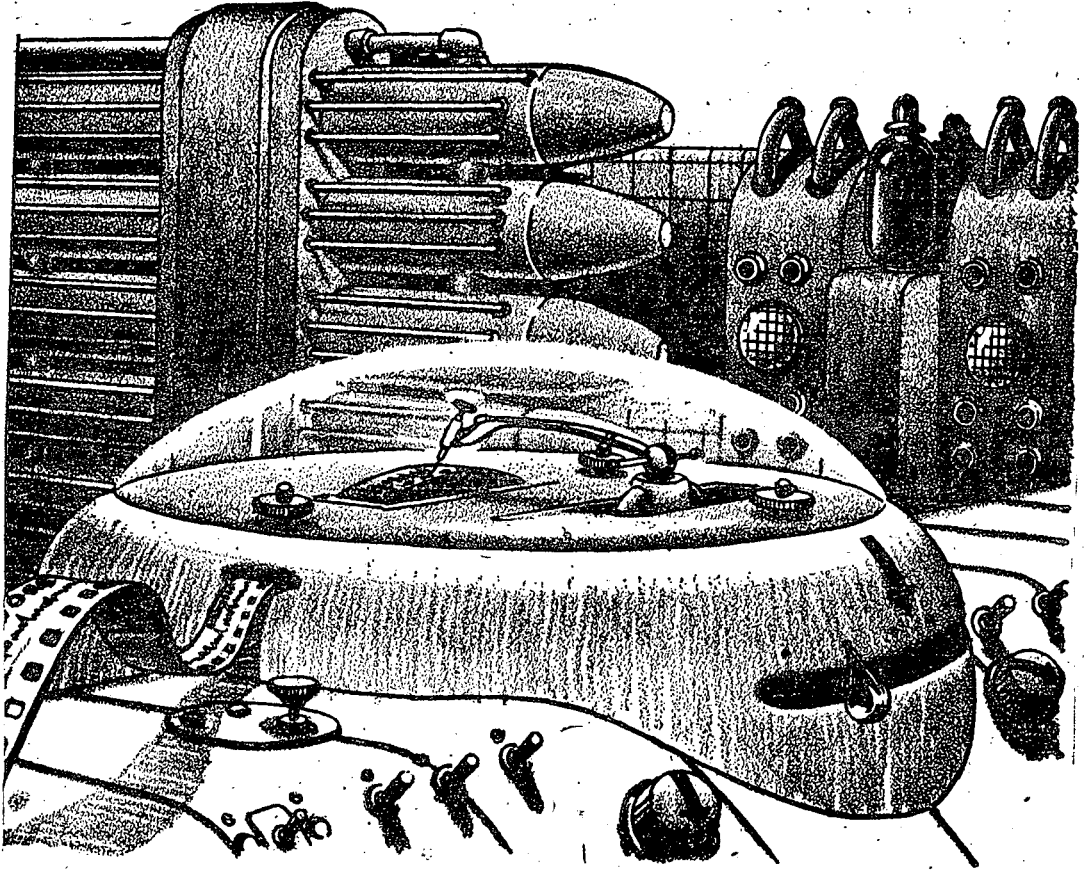
Easily applied to a nut and bolt, once they are fastened, the anaerobic permafil immediately hardens between them and secures the joint tightly, so tightly, in fact, that it is harder to break open than if conventional fasteners like lock washers had been used. For ordinary cementing jobs these substances can do better than most glues for they will lock together entirely different substances. For porous bricks and castings a coat need only be applied. It will penetrate and harden. Its uses have only been touched. Watch it make a solid splash when it appears commercially!



Icy fear came over Kent as the tiny needles for sensory perception probed into his head

Cube Sinister

**Kent was anxious to return to Earth:
the finest spot in the Solar System.
But it seemed they'd "improved" it!**



By Arthur G. Stangland

THE WARNING siren would sound any minute now, and Kent was anxious to get aboard the passenger rocket. He'd seen the liquid fuel lines drop away from its tall snout, the elevators were through lifting baggage to the freight ports, and the ground crew were giving its tail fins and exhaust pipe a final check. Most of the passengers were aboard.

Billings was a hard man to convince. Kent scratched his neck in exasperation and tried again.

"I tell you I'm quitting because I want to go home to Earth."

"You're sure it's not more money?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"I'll double your pay."

Kent gestured helplessly, shaking his head and grinning wryly. "Look, Bill

—it's nothing you've done, it's not the pay, it's not even my living quarters. I'm just sick and tired of Mars, that's all; sick of beating my brains out running the mine, sick of the frontier life. You don't have to worry about anything you've done. I've explained my reasons fully in my letter of resignation."

Billings shook his head. "Then you really meant it in your letter when you said you're going back to Earth to live under the New System?"

"That's right. I've spent my years pioneering the Martian colony. Now I want to go home and live like a civilized man again."

Billings turned to Betty Ronson, the company nurse. "Haven't you been able to talk him out of his notion?"

Slender, brown-eyed Betty smiled slowly, looking across at Kent, and shook her head. "Stu doesn't talk out of anything very easy once his mind is made up."

"Well, while you're vacationing on Earth, Betty, see if you can't persuade him to come back with you. He's the best engineer the company has, and I hate to lose him."

"I'll do what I can."

Kent clamped his lips tight in a mock expression of indignation. "Yeah, I know. You both think I've made my mind up overnight about this matter. Well, you're wrong. I've read everything I could lay my hands on about the New System."

Betty hunched her shoulders to the wind, looking significantly at Billings. "Don't I know it! With two moons in the Martian night, he spent darned few nights strolling under them with me."

KENT IGNORED the interruption. "The New System is a beautiful setup. It's the ultimate scientific organization of society, and it all came

out of the brilliant brain of Tolero Shawn. In his 'Philosophy of the Body Nationale' he describes his concept of organic integration."

Billings interrupted him to say, "Stu, if you ever have trouble finding an engineering job, you'd make a swell book salesman."

"And you'd be my hardest prospect." Kent went on: "You both asked for this, so you can just listen. Now, think about that concept of organic integration. Think of it! Everyone's capacities, abilities, gifts, education and experience are registered at the national repository of Total Intelligence—the Gray Cube—which rules the individual cells—people—of Shawn's 'Body Nationale'. The potential of the nation is the sum total of the individual potentials, and everyone is placed in the position for which he is best fitted. No more round pegs in square holes."

Suddenly a speaker blared from the top of the terminal building: "All aboard that's going aboard. Firing time: Ten minutes!"

Kent glanced toward the rocket and back at Billings. "Well, Boss, so long and good luck. Maybe I will sell you a book sometime on—"

From the direction of the terminal came a pot-bellied little old yellow-skinned Martian native on the run.

"Meest Kant—Meest Kant!"

Kent recognized him. Old Baldy from down by the swamps beyond the mines. A friendly old man and one of his best mine foremen.

He came up with outstretched right hand holding a transparent iridescent gold globule.

"Meest Kant—you 'ave this," he panted, holding out the ovoid. "The good-luck Golden Globule."

Kent hefted the ovoid in the palm of his hand, then grinned back at Old Baldy. He raised his eyes to Billings.

"Where I'm going, there's no need to worship the God of Chance. Nothing is left to luck. You keep it, Baldy."

But Old Baldy would have nothing to do with it again. "You keep. Is all I 'ave to geeve you for present."

Kent dropped the piece in his pocket, as the field siren started up with a piercing shriek. Kent grabbed Billings' hand and pumped it. "So long, Bill."

Looking straight at him, Billings lifted his voice above the noise. "Stu, you're a pioneer at heart. You'll be back sooner than you think!"

"No, I won't! Come on, Betty, we're heading for God's green world!"

THEY HALTED at a street corner, and when the light changed Betty stepped out, stopped, then looked at Kent. He stood curiously still, his head lifted.

"Listen," he said raptly, "listen to the music of the city!"

It was a song, a well loved song he had forgotten for years. A vibrant, emotional thing, a symphony score pulsing with the soft purr of limousines that threaded in and out of sonorous tones of busses and lumbering trucks and embellished by the nostalgic throbbing thunder of an air giant far overhead.

Betty looked up into his face with an expression of regretful discovery. "You really have missed all this, haven't you?"

He lowered his head and upon him was a peaceful calm of deep satisfaction. "I feel like a man just out of prison." Then he shook himself out of his reverie. "Let's go get something to eat at—"

He felt a tap on his left shoulder. A hard, insistent tap. Irritated, he turned around. At his elbow stood a man with a blunt, hard face and knowing cold eyes that bored steadily into him. The man turned his lapel, and

Kent saw the badge.

With a sarcastic, travelling glance that swept Kent from head to foot, the officer began, "Now, look, Mac, you two just can't go wandering around the city like this. In the first place, the spaceport told you to register at the Gray Cube as soon as you got into the city. I've tailed you for almost an hour now, and all you've done is moon around street corners like a dope straight from the sticks. Now, you both get along—the Cube is five blocks down and two over."

The angle of Kent's jaw grew a little sharper, the light in his eyes blazed a little higher, and all over him there grew an imperceptible tightening of muscle and bone. He said, "Funny thing, in all I read about the New System I never ran across the likes of you."

The officer snapped a menacing, "What's that?"

Kent glanced up at the green light, then lifted his shoulders in an indolent shrug. "Skip it. We're on our way to the Cube."

WITHOUT a backward glance, Kent guided them into the streaming river of humanity flowing solidly along the streets. For a block they walked in silence, and he dared to steal a sideward glance at Betty. How could a woman put a man behind the eight ball by just being silent? Not an ordinary silence but the silence of the 'I-told-you-it-would-be-like-this' kind.

He had to talk. The compulsion to defend himself from her silence was too strong. He said, "That cop... he's not the New System, and anyway you find his kind any place you go."

She was entirely innocent as she agreed. "That's true."

He walked on in silence, feeling defensively belligerent and hating him-

self for it. The voice of the city was now a jangle of noise that irritated him all of a sudden, because what wasn't being said between them was creating more chill silence. Or—was it possible that the whole thing was taking place inside of him, and Betty only symbolized that part of him that was critical of the New System from the outset? In sudden panic he tried to retreat from the shadow of confusion, and save intact his fine enthusiasm he had found on faraway Mars.

"Oh look—the Cube!" Betty's amazement brought him back to reality.

He looked up the street, then looked again. The Gray Cube was an immense pile, its vast gray stone exterior unadorned by any architectural trimmings. It was like a small city in itself.

They arrived at the heavy crystal doors swung wide open, and passed through into a great hall. Looking around for someone to direct them, Kent found a sign that said, "New Registrations."

"That's us, I guess."

At the counter, a man in steel-rimmed glasses and a smileless face nodded curtly at them. "Immigrants?"

Kent said, "I am. She's vacationing from Mars."

The man stamped a sheet of paper, saying, "All right, we'll process you. She gets a visitor's permit." He peered at them a moment with eyes as expressionless as marbles. "You married?"

"No."

"Well, we'll still have to make you responsible for her behavior after you've been processed. Someone always has to be responsible for a visitor."

THE WAY he said it it sounded as if he were talking about a parolee. Kent's face reddened and his eyes

stayed wide open and unblinking. He shoved his hat brim up.

"Look—has she got the face of a shoplifter, a pickpocket, or maybe a blackmailer? How innocent do you have to look—like a day-old baby?"

The other stared at him through his steel-rimmed glasses. Then he snapped, "It would help!"

Betty stepped into the moment with a sprightly, "I'll wait for you over here, Stu. I see some tri-vision magazines I want to look through."

Kent turned away. "Okay, see you later."

A guide showed him to the escalators. And as he ascended several floors he became aware of the utter silence. The silence of the mind. It was almost oppressive, and when he walked along a short corridor it was as if he were disembodied. He opened a door and found himself in a cell-like room deep in the interior of the Cube. Before a gray panel board stood an old man. Thin graying hair, high cheekbones, nervous bony hands. And squatting low in front of him a form-fitting easy chair with looping wires and clamp terminals dangling at the armrests. Kent smiled in rapt absorption. The annoying cop, the officious registration clerk below—these were merely isolated phenomena outside the norm. Here in this control room was the mathematician's dream. With relish he remembered descriptions of it, personality ingeniously recorded on moving tapes from a squiggling stylus, memory potential measured, learning capacity explored—

"I said sit down!" the little old man cried testily. "How many times do I have to talk?"

Kent emerged from his reverie, aware now that the old man must have spoken several times to him.

"Sorry," he muttered, sitting into the chair and letting it form comfort-

ably against his back.

"Just relax." The old man moved carefully about him, attaching the terminal clamps to his wrists. Last of all he lowered a complicated crown of short glass vertical tubes on to his head. As the cold surfaces cooled his head, Kent felt a moment of slight alarm.

THERE WAS no time to indulge it.

The old man stepped to the control panel and tripped a toggle switch. Immediately, although Kent wasn't aware of it, an infinitely tiny point of sensory perception started moving over the top of his head like a fine needle. It searched out each individual cell of his brain, sucking, sucking up all the deposits of learning and experience it could find. Terrible drowsiness closed in like ground fog. The probing went on and on and stretched his nerves until he wanted to scream and scream against the imminent loss of his soul. Then, suddenly, eternity came to an end and he was aware of the old man lifting the glass and metal crown from his head.

Detaching the wrist contacts the old man said, "That's it. We've picked your brains, we've got your neuron pattern, we've practically psychoed you. And it's all photographed down to the size of the dot over an 'i' on the finest molecular emulsion and recorded permanently upstairs in the evaluators. Come along; I'll show you around."

Feeling as if he were recovering from a hangover, Kent shook his head to clear it. He followed the old man upstairs to a floor covered with a whole acre of electronic evaluators. And above them still were twenty more floors of the organic complex. They stopped at one of them, and Kent saw a television screen. On it appeared a square of tiny dots, perhaps ten thou-

sand in all, he estimated. They were fading and reappearing again like tiny lamps.

"Each one of those dots," the old man explained, "is a code impulse for every man, woman and child registered with this particular machine. Any information sifting in through the Cube concerning one of those people is connected with the correct memory convolution through that tiny dot."

ON ANOTHER floor above he showed Kent a bank of spinning cylinders, shiny gleaming surfaces of glass or plastic.

"What are these?"

Like a proud father parading his favorite off-spring, the old man said, "From below where the evaluators are answering vitastat requests, the information is piped up to the fax-projectors. The microfilm pictures of words appear on the inside of the transparent cylinders, where the photo-eye picks up the images and radios them to the intended person."

Before he left the old man, Kent asked, "Now that I've registered, how do I get a job?"

"All of your vital statistics—or vitastat as we call it—have been sorted, analyzed and coded by now in the evaluators. In another part of the complex on the floors above is the 'demand positions open' section. All you have to do is dial 'Division Primary Vitastat'. All your vital data are matched up with the exact requirements of the positions open. In a very short while, you get your vitastat. And of course, once it is delivered, you are bound by law to your position. We have a saying, 'A position for everyone and everyone in his position.'"

The sight of the vast complex spread out before him left Kent breathless. Here was order, regulation, mathematical beauty.

"It's the most marvelous thing this generation has produced," he said, idly playing with the golden globule in his right hand.

The old man eyed him and the globule. "What's that thing?"

"This? Oh, a Martian good luck piece."

The old man sniffed. "Good luck piece! Throw that damned thing away. We make our own luck."

"I guess you're right," Kent sheepishly stuffed the plastic ball in a pocket.

Out in the main offices he said to Betty, "Well, as Shawn said in his Philosophy, I'm now a cell in the Body Nationale. Let's go celebrate!"

The man at the desk said pointedly, "Tomorrow you must secure your Vitastat and place yourself in a job. As for finances, you are allowed only twenty credits until you are registered in a job."

Kent brought up short with, "Credits? You mean I can't use the money I brought back from Mars?"

THE MAN gave him a disdainful look. "Money? How barbaric! We don't recognize the monetary system from the colonial outposts." He handed him a card. "This is your credit authority which is good only up to twenty credits."

Wordlessly, Kent took the credit card and placed it in an inner pocket. It was clear that a number of aspects of the New System had been suspiciously glossed over in all he had read. However, as he glanced aside at Betty's innocent-looking face, it was equally clear he had better gloss over it, too, if he expected to escape that ever present trap—*"Betty, see if you can't persuade him to come back with you."*

Outside the Gray Cube, Kent decided to put on a gay front. After all,

this was a homecoming that should be celebrated appropriately. Home to the green hills of Earth!

"Let's go to the Glass Slipper for supper," he suggested. "They have some good numbers in the floor shows there."

"Fine. I'm famished anyway."

They walked five blocks uptown to the supper club—or to where it should have been. Kent looked at the empty windows, feeling as if he were looking into the sightless eyes of a man. A newspaper vendor held out a paper.

"Daily Herald?"

Kent said, "What happened to the Glass Slipper?"

The vendor looked at him for a moment, then answered, "You must be new here, mister. The Glass Slipper was closed down when the New System started. They said it took peoples' minds off the New System."

Kent felt a distinct shock of surprise and irritation. "Oh."

He lifted his shoulders in a shrug of resignation. "Well, let's try Leftridge's. No floor show, but at least they always had good food."

But when they arrived at the location of the restaurant, they found a government office had moved in and taken over the space.

"Too many restaurants in the area," a taxi driver told them, "so the government closed it down."

For a long interval Kent stood looking into the street, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. Fine celebration this was turning out to be. His favorite club closed down, one of the best restaurants too. And it was beginning to rain. Funny how awfully wet it could seem. He took the Golden Globule out of his pocket and looked at it pensively.

"Stu."

He didn't look at her. "Yeah?"

"Instead of tramping all over town,

let's just eat at Mike's Place across the street there. I'm hungry."

He began to grin. "Okay, guess I'm hungry enough to, too."

THE NEXT day was sunny and bright and Kent was in a more cheerful mood as he walked to the Gray Cube. After all, last night was a bust—so what? This was another day. He couldn't blame it on the New System. A changeover in any system inevitably brought dislocations, but they would soon be ironed out.

He walked gaily into the immense cavern of the Cube. Today was the day. The day he was going to become an active cell in the Body Nationale. Arriving at "New Registrations" again he said, "I'm reporting for my job."

The man with the smileless face said, "Report to the Placement Department please." He inclined his head across the cavernous space of the building.

Turning, Kent saw the sign. He said, "Okay."

But there were others looking for placement too, and Kent found himself in a long queue. After an hour's wait he finally found himself before a sharp-faced dark man.

"Your Vitastat card," the man said shortly.

"I was only processed yesterday," Kent told him. "This is my first trip around."

"Oh." The other consulted a sheaf of papers covered with lists of names. At last he checked off Kent's. "Yeah, here you are. Window washer."

Kent looked at him as if he hadn't heard right. "What was that?"

"I said you're a window washer."

Kent rested his arms on the counter deliberately. "I thought that's what you said. Window washer? I'm a mining engineer, and that's what I'm going to be."

The other's dark eyes narrowed. "Look—all I know is you're down here as a window washer. I guess they got mining engineers, so they give you a job as a window washer."

Ken didn't move. "But I don't want to be a window washer. Hell, I'll do drafting, computing, anything in engineering, but I'll be damned if I'll wash windows!"

The dark-faced man on the other side of the gate window shoved the sheaf of papers aside. "You're a window washer for the government janitor service. Now, do I gotta call a cop to make you understand?"

Kent stared back at him for a long, long moment. So this was what it was like to live in a police state. No choice of your own. A point tracing a precise curve has no volition either. And so the whole New System skeleton stood revealed to him in one numbing moment of horror.

He relaxed, all the resentment in him turning to resignation. "No, I—I guess I understand everything clearly now. Where do I report for work?"

The man smiled only in one corner of his mouth. "That's the right way to take things. You'll make a fine cell, and get along better with that attitude. Okay, report to the Central Janitor Combine in Sixth Street tomorrow."

AT THE end of the fourth day he walked into his room, trudged to a chair and sank into it utterly dejected. As he rubbed sore, aching shoulders and arms he thought bitterly of that easy phrase—"a cell in the Body Nationale." More properly, he was trapped in the body of a monster, from which there was no escape.

And another thing. Where could Betty be? One more week and she would be heading back to Mars. The day she left would be the blackest day

of his life now, he realized. He looked at the telephone and picked it up, as he had done for four days hoping to find her in.

After a moment of dialing, to his considerable relief he heard her familiar voice say, "Hello?"

He said, "The nicest thing I've heard in four days. Where you been?"

"Stu! I've been visiting friends out of town."

"I've called every day." He hesitated a moment then went on: "Can't we get together. I gotta talk."

"Why not come over here?"

"Be right over."

A half hour later he walked into her apartment. "This is the best thing that happened to me since you left," he said, beaming with immense pleasure. She was dressed in green and gold.

"Mister, you say the prettiest things—sometimes," she laughed.

He took her hands in his, looking into her clear blue eyes and wondering why he had never noticed how beautiful and soft they were. Without dwelling too much on details, he gave her the story of the last four days.

"Oh, Stu, I'm so sorry it's turned out like this for you. I really am."

He looked aside as he said, "Betty; I—I suppose you realize I've made a beach head—and there's no retreating now."

Her answer was soft, full of understanding sympathy. "Yes, I know that, Stu."

Taking his courage in hand he looked up to face her again. "Darling, I guess this New System isn't Utopia after all, but you could make it so, if you'd marry me!"

She kept looking at him for a long minute after his words. At last a bright smile spread slowly over her face and up to her eyes. "And that's the nicest thing that has happened to

me since I left Mars."

Kent squeezed her hands convulsively until she tried to pull them back. "You mean you will marry me, darling?"

"Yes, Stu, I'll marry you." She sighed a bit as she said, "Poor Billings, I didn't have the heart to tell him I wouldn't be back."

Kent stared at her a moment as the import of her statement drove home. Then he gathered her into his arms with a glad shout. "Betty!"

THE NEXT day they appeared before a Justice of the Peace, a kindly oldster with twinkling blue eyes peering over the tops of his spectacles. "I see," he said, nodding his head, "you want to get married. But where is your Marriage Authorization from the Gray Cube?"

Kent frowned in frustration. "Marriage Authorization? Never heard of that before."

"Sorry, my friends, but you have to have it first."

A cold clammy feeling of foreboding clutched at Kent's insides as he and Betty walked out of the office. Now what kind of deviltry were they up against at the Cube? They hurried over to the Gray Cube building.

At the information desk Kent was directed to the marriage bureau. An austere looking spinster was busy sorting cards when they came up.

"We want to get married," Kent began. "We understand we have to have an authorization from the Cube. Can you make it out right away?"

The spinster adjusted her glasses and stared at him. "It's not that easy. Marriage is a serious business to the Body Nationale, and not a haphazard affair." She paused, glancing from one to the other. "Where are your Vitastat cards?"

Kent took a breath of exasperation.

"I got one, but she hasn't. Now what do we do?"

The spinster's brows lowered. "It seems to me that anybody with sense enough to be registered at the Cube would know that all parties to a marriage have to be registered here. She'll have to be processed."

Kent was silent a moment, too angered to answer the other's jab.

Betty stepped into the breach with, "That's all right, Kent. I'll go and get processed right away."

"All right, honey."

For an hour Kent sat in a chair and smoked while waiting for her to come down out of the great interior of the building. At last she appeared again and he got up in relief.

"Okay," he said with a grin. "Now we can get this over with in a hurry, I hope."

They appeared at the spinster's counter again and Kent said, "Here's her card and mine. Now, let's have some action on that authorization."

"We don't hurry in such matters," the other said. "We have to match up your Vitastats first. If all vital primary points are mutual, you'll get the authorization."

AS SHE turned away, Kent gave Betty a puzzled look. The spinster placed the two cards in a photo-fax recorder and flipped a switch with a negligent finger. In a few minutes an automatic typewriter began clicking. Kent watched the woman pull a sheet of paper out of the machine. The look she gave him as she glanced up filled him with uncertainty. She walked back to the other end of the machine and removed one of the cards. Then she flipped the same switch again. After another interval the typewriter clattered out another message, which she tore off the machine.

Her face was noncommittal as she

came up to them. She gave Kent a bleak look before she spoke.

"Of course, you understand all factors are sorted out and weighed one against the other," she began, "with all of them judged in the light of greatest good for the Body Nationale. So, after sending all your mutual data upstairs, the answer comes down that you two cannot be married. Instead, after sending your data upstairs and matching with other eligible females, we have another girl whose traits and personality will complement yours for a perfect union."

Kent took a deep, nostril-flaring breath and yelled, "By God, there's one thing your damned machines upstairs can't do, and that is make me live with a woman I don't want. So long, Aunt Peachy!"

Outside the Gray Cube, Kent stood for a moment on the sidewalk staring at the traffic unseeingly. At last Betty said, "Come on up to my apartment, Stu, and let's have a quiet supper."

"Okay, cherub. Maybe I'll be able to get hold of myself."

At her apartment, Kent lounged deep in a chair while the busy sounds of Betty preparing a meal came to him from the kitchen. With a pre-occupied air, he studied the Golden Globule in his right hand as it glinted and sparkled.

He said bitterly, "All those books and articles I read were just so much sucker bait. Authorized marriages—huh, they never mentioned the subject!"

From the kitchen Betty said, "Perhaps we were too hasty in leaving the Cube, Stu. Could be that there's a committee of appeal of some kind where we might go to present our case."

Kent continued to toss the ovoid, watching it idly as the liquid splashed about inside. "Nope. You don't appeal to a calculating machine. We're

just stuck—you and I."

PRESENTLY, Kent stopped tossing the Golden Globule and let it rest in his hand again. This time he looked at it as if he were really seeing it for the first time in his life. His mouth tightened into a grim line and he glanced toward the kitchen door. Then he got up and walked into the bathroom.

From the kitchen Betty glanced through the living room to see him lifting a glass of water in the bathroom to his lips.

"Let the water run," she said, "it takes a long while to get cool water."

As she set the table Betty tried to present a cheerful face to Kent, but he sat wrapped in sober silence. Half way through the meal he put down his cup of coffee and sat back in his chair. He lifted a hand to his forehead and rubbed it.

"I—I don't feel well."

Betty slowly put down her fork. "Why, Stu—"

For a moment she sat looking at him in mounting concern. Then, the professional nurse in her roused her to action and she got up, walking around the table to him. Crisply, efficiently she touched his forehead, lifted his left eyelid to peer into his pupil, pushed up his chin and carefully examined both sides of his throat. She straightened, leaning back against the table.

"Feverish skin, narrowed pupils—and splotches on both sides of the throat." It had the sound of symptoms being read out of a medical book. "Stu, I can't believe it—and fight here on Earth, too. You've got Martian swamp fever!"

He was breathing faster now, and he shifted in his chair trying to make himself comfortable. Then he shook his head to clear it. "Well, I can

believe it. I feel like the wrath of God."

With compassion softening her voice, Betty said, "Oh, Stu, and after what you've been through already." She crossed to the telephone, saying, "I'm going to get a doctor right away."

Kent watched her as she riffled through the telephone book and dialed the number. Watched her—and lingered over the details of her silhouette that no New System could satisfactorily substitute with a mathematically selected eugenic mate.

She came back from the phone. "Got to get you into bed before the doctor comes."

Without protest he let her order him around, nor did he protest her supporting arm as she led him into her bedroom. From the comfortable depths of her bed he looked up at her with a grin. "There's only one good thing about this."

"What's that?"

"I won't have to wash any windows tomorrow."

A HALF HOUR later, Kent heard Betty let the doctor into the apartment. But instead of one, there sounded two men's voices. In a moment at the bedroom door appeared a small, quick moving sparrow of a man with round eyes behind thick glasses. With him was a big man, square-faced with thin lips and a sallow complexion. Under his right arm he carried a thick brief case.

Betty introduced the small man as Dr. Tatter. The other was Jakob Brine of the Cube Security Section.

Brine took his place at the foot of the bed and fixed Kent with an accusing direct gaze. Abruptly, he launched into the middle of a harsh-toned diatribe.

"Before Dr. Tatter looks you over, I want to warn you against falsely re-

porting yourself ill." He pulled a sheet of paper from his brief case. "Your record so far has been anything but positive. The first day of window washing you deliberately left thirty-two windows of the Accounting Building frosted over until forced to polish them. The fourth day you—"

Kent reared up on his elbows to grin at the man with relish. "Yeah, on the fourth day I socked the First Inspector when he kicked an old charwoman scrubbing an office floor. Now look, you, let's forget the inquisition and let Dr. Tatter do his stuff."

With a baleful snort, Brine stuffed the paper back into his brief case. Then he gave the doctor a curt nod.

Fussily adjusting his glasses, the officious Dr. Tatter waved Betty aside and leaned over Kent. He peered into his mouth, ramming a tongue depressor so far down that Kent gulped ominously and he withdrew it in alarm. Without even bothering to take his temperature or pulse, Dr. Tatter straightened up and pontifically delivered his opinion.

"There's nothing wrong with this man."

And as far as the two men were concerned that was that. Brine even opened his brief case to get a form sheet which he began to fill out.

HER MOUTH dropping open in angry amazement, Betty spoke up sharply: "I told you over the phone I was reporting a case of Martian swamp fever, Doctor."

A pink flush spread up and over the doctor's narrow cheeks. With injured dignity he turned on Betty. "Look here, lady, I didn't come to dispute diagnoses with you."

The intended freeze was lost on Betty who shot back, "I, Doctor Tatter, am a nurse with the General Metals Corporation on Mars. I know Martian swamp fever when I see it—and I've

seen it knock out a hundred men at a time."

The tone, the delivery, the fire behind the statement carried a conviction that could not be shrugged off. Jakob Brine looked up at her with new interest and respect.

"A hundred men?"

"A hundred men." Betty's voice carried an unshakable finality.

Barely looking at his brief case Brine stuffed the form sheet back into it. To the doctor he said, "There's something we better look into here, Tatter. Forget the phoney act and get busy on him."

The peremptory tone put angry color in Tatter's face. A certain air of careless indifference went out of him, and his small mouth tightened up. For a moment his glinting, unblinking eyes met Brine's, then fell away.

"Very well," he said.

Now he made a thorough examination, taking pulse and temperature, listening to Kent's heart and looking closely at his throat. Then he straightened up with a stiffly professional air.

"Fever," he announced. "I've never seen its like before and nobody else has either on Earth. It could decimate the land!"

KENT RALLIED himself to sit up in bed, looking at the Security man with a grim, stiff smile. "Well, Brine, what're you thinking? Are you thinking about that giant brain, the Cube? Sitting there clicking and clucking to itself. Can you imagine what's going to happen if this fever starts racing through the country like wildfire? All the delicately balanced cybernetic brains are going to tear their electrical guts out, jammed up by people reporting sick absence. And who's going to be blamed for the whole gum-up? You are, Brine. You can't cover up contagion!"

The Security man's upper lip lifted

in a snarl. "Shut up!" He looked at Tatter sharply. "Don't be so smug about this, Tatter. They'd crucify you, too, you know."

The doctor smiled mirthlessly as his right hand played nervously with a coat button. "They wouldn't know about it but for you. And who told me before we came up here to certify this man as a goldbricker?"

"Cut it out, Tatter. We're in a jam and we got to get ourselves out of it." Brine's voice had taken on a desperate edge.

Dr. Tatter studied the floor a moment, then lifted his eyes. "The only sure way to get out of it, that I can see, is to ship him back to Mars. There's a rocket leaving in a few hours."

"But he's processed at the Cube, and on my list for regular check-up. How can I clear him for deportation?"

"We can do it under the Incompatibility Act. I'll declare him a menace to public welfare under the Health section, and that will release us of legal

liability at the Cube." Dr. Tatter turned to Betty. "Can you accompany him on the return trip to Mars?"

A sudden spreading smile appeared on Betty's oval face. "I certainly can."

Tatter picked up his medical case. "Then that's all there is to it. We'll clear everything at the Cube, and the proper papers will be at the spaceport waiting for you."

After the men had gone Kent looked up at Betty and grinned. "What d'you know, cherub, we're going home!"

But Betty was looking down at him with a puzzled frown. "Stu, I still can't understand how you came down with the fever at this time."

In spite of the fever Kent managed a mysterious grin. "Tell you all about it, girl. They told me they made their own luck here under the New System—that the Cube took care of everything. Well, I made my own luck too—the natural kind. My good luck piece, the Golden Globule, is filled with Martian swamp water."

THE END

IT'S HARD TO GET NOTHING!

RELATIVITY specialists like to think of the universe as "stuff with space around it." They say the amount of matter or stuff governs the amount of space and that the two are inseparable. Unlike the Cheshire cat, you can't have the grin without the face! But within the limited regions of empty space explored here on Earth, science does a pretty good job of separating the two.

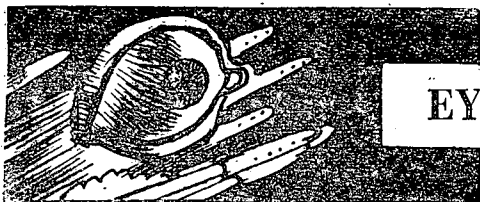
Dr. Andrade, a well known physicist, has pointed out some more of those familiar comparisons that scientists always feel they have to make about vacuum work. In fact, in no other way is it possible to understand really what a vacuum is about. Modern vacuum pumps are pretty good, the physicist points out, but they've still got a long way to go before they can equal the emptiness provided by the empty space between the planets or the stars.

A familiar application of the vacuum is the radio tube, or the thermos bottle. In

both cases the air has been well removed from these containers, but it is surprising how many molecules of air are still left. You could distribute one thousand molecules to each inhabitant of the Earth! That, in spite of the fact that the pressure has been reduced to one ten millionth of a millionth of an atmosphere of pressure! Empty space between the stars drags that pressure down by another one ten millionth of a millionth of an atmosphere! Man is far from having that skill!

But that doesn't mean our vacuums are not practical. The multitude of devices depending upon vacuums, such as radio tubes, etc., indicate that to all practical intents and purposes we can do all right. In addition, without vacuum systems the research tools such as cyclotrons and electron microscopes which have opened up the world of the future, would not exist. We can still make plenty of nothing!

—Ralph Cox



EYE OF THE FUTURE

By George Lasker

"CRANTH IV stared through the video-plate. On the circular screen he could see the enemy space-ships forming before his eyes. Despair filled him. With an oath, he cut the video-screen switch..."

Do "video-plate" or "visi-screen" strike a familiar note? Are these gadgets part and parcel of your science-fiction background? They should be, for even the veriest tyro in s-f recognizes that space-ships have (will have?) solid metal shells without portholes or windows and that views are obtained of the outside through television-like screens with the scanner mounted outside the vessel.

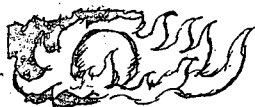
As in so many things, fact has anticipated fiction, or the technicians have jumped the gun on the writers, once again. It was to be expected in this particular device because the day of the space-ship is very near to us (think of supersonic speeds!).

Today experimental jet and rocket aircraft are being built whose speeds are incredibly high. It is rumored that one ship has been built which does twice the speed of sound—this is a jet job too! Rocket craft have gone even faster. One problem bothering the builders of these high-speed aircraft is the matter of air resistance and consequently skin-friction. Powerful motors

can overcome air resistance, but skin-friction causes the plane to become uncomfortably hot and this too can be conquered with refrigerating apparatus. But every protuberance, from wings to cockpits, increases both these interfering effects. Still the pilot has to be able to see where he's going even if the wings are removed. To eliminate the blister through which the pilot looks requires some sort of substitute vision.

The visi-plate is here!

Technicians have completely streamlined and smoothed the surface of supersonic craft so that nothing at all protrudes except a couple of stubby wings—and these too will go eventually. The pilot encased in his shell—some call it a "coffin"—of metal looks into the receiving end of a TV set, while mounted in the nose of the plane is a TV camera. And that's your visi-plate! One peculiar effect of this artificial vision system is that very little magnification must be used; otherwise the pilot tends to become confused and misjudges distances and speeds too badly. Nevertheless, the visi-plate system is here, long in advance of the space-ships which will finally use it. Just another example of where fact has at last caught up with fiction!



HOTTER THAN HADES!

Jon Barry

WHILE THERE is nothing hotter than the interior of a sun or star, on Earth we've achieved its equal for a fraction of a second during the explosion of an atomic bomb. Still that heat and temperature isn't usable in a practical sense. Its duration is much too short.

Atomic hydrogen (no connection with the Bomb) and oxy-acetylene torches are familiar gadgets in industrial plants. They generate temperatures up to a few thousand degrees. But recently there were unveiled two heat-producers which are simply out of this world. One of them is the hydrogen-fluorine torch, a simple device which brings these two gases together and produces a temperature in the neighborhood of *ten thousand degrees Fahrenheit!*

The hydrogen-fluorine torch is as hot as the surface of a blue star, twice as hot as the surface of our own Sun and hot enough to melt any known substance on the face of the Earth. It goes through metals literally like a hot knife through butter. The most refractory substance on Earth, zirconium dioxide, flows like water beneath its flame, and fire-brick and asbestos are just

so much water to the torch.

The other torch uses powdered aluminum burning in pure oxygen. This job is about as hot as the surface of the sun and like the other torch can do a terrific job of melting down things.

Both torches have a great deal of practical value. Since they can generate such tremendous heat in a small space they can be used in many cases where the need for localized melting exists. In emergency rescue work, for example, they can be used for cutting through tough metals and ceramics in minutes, whereas conventional methods require hours, by which time the victim has perished.

Welding operations in industry will be facilitated, and the working of difficult metals and substances like tungsten, vanadium and other refractories will become easy. It has been suggested that these new heat-generating methods will find their greatest application in atomic and nuclear physics. Evidently some important problems in these sciences require unusual temperatures. You've got 'em, boys, you've got 'em now....

SAM MERWIN'S



SCIENCE FICTION

BOOKCASE

POSSIBLE WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION, edited by Groff Conklin, Vanguard Press, Inc., New York (\$2.95).

Apparently it is no longer possible to peddle a science fiction anthology to a publisher merely by collecting the best stories lying around loose. Today the anthologist has to have a theme and the stories must fit it or else. The result is that recent anthologies, although themed-up to the teeth, have suffered from a certain uneven quality that did not appear in the best of their predecessors, notably Mr. Conklin's previous efforts in the field.

In this instance he opens with a pioneer trip to good old Luna as conceived by Raymond Z. Gallun in **OPERATION PUMICE** and, after progressing all the way to Neptune's moons in Margaret St. Clair's **THE PILLOWS**, concludes Part One with a jaunt into the Sun itself via Hal Clement's **PROOF**. Part Two moves mankind out into the galaxy at large, beginning with Murray Leinster's Space Assassin classic, **PROPAGANDIST**, and concludes with **THE HELPING HAND**, Poul Anderson's disturbing little epic of galactic empire.

In between are stories of varying if generally high quality by such authentic masters as Robert A. Heinlein, A.E. van Vogt, Ray Bradbury, Isaac

Asimov, Theodore Sturgeon, Clifford D. Simak, James H. Schmitz and Arthur C. Clarke. In our judgment well worth the money—and of course a collector's must.

★ ★ ★

ADVENTURES IN TOMORROW, edited by Kendell Foster Crossen, Greenberg Publisher, New York (\$3.50).

Mr. Crossen's anthological theme is basically similar to Mr. Conklin's, although he carries the thing a whole lot further—moving from the Atomic Age (1960-2100 AD) to the Galactic Age (2100-3000 AD), on to the Stellar Age (3000-10,000 AD) and finally into something he called the Delphic Age (10,000 AD and up), which has humanity or its facsimiles operating all over the place. But since Robert Arthur, Anthony Boucher and Bruce Elliott are the authors pulling the Delphic strings this reviewer enjoyed the big spread.

Aside from the inevitable Bradbury, Asimov, Sturgeon and van Vogt entries (good ones too), Mr. Crossen has come up with some notable stories by Ward Moore, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, C. L. Moore, Leigh Brackett and Henry Kuttner. In general this anthology, while offering fewer stories for more money than Mr. Conklin's, is a much more level job where quality

is concerned. Our only beef is over a little primitive by your reviewer that Crossen must have dug up from a dustbin. He shouldn't oughta have done it.

★ ★ ★

THE ILLUSTRATED MAN, by Ray Bradbury, Doubleday and Company Inc., New York (\$2.75).

On a string even thinner if a lot more glittering than either of the anthologists above, Mr. Bradbury has strung a dozen and a half of his inimitable fantasy jewels. Employing a much broader focus than in his last year's collection, *The Martian Chronicles*, the author dips into various sorts and degrees of horror with such entries as *The Veldt*, *Kaleidoscope*, *The Long Rain*, *The City* and others, seasons with religion in *The Man* and *The Fire Balloons*, then turns around and tops with a (to most readers) totally unexpected sprinkling of slapstick satire in *The Concrete Mixer*. To us this last and *Kaleidoscope* were the top stories included but each Bradburyophile will have to select his own. Bradburyophobes had better start running now.

★ ★ ★

RENAISSANCE, by Raymond F. Jones, Gnome Press, New York (\$2.75).

This is a story of parallels within parallels—the parallels being time-tracks, worlds or what have you. It involves the revolt of a young technician named Ketan, who resents the ironbound traditions that confine him to a rut in a very odd world-community called Kronweld; ruled by one of those machine dinguses.

Kronweld is a world without birth, since children apparently are born of

the machine, and Ketan decides this form of the stork is not for him. He discovers that the machine actually is a time-track matter transferer that brings folk born elsewhere into Kronweld—but to learn this and shatter the strange shackles of Kronweld, Ketan has to run a perilous course through a number of worlds himself. Exciting if a bit tricky at times.

★ ★ ★

GATHER DARKNESS, by Fritz Lieber, Grosset & Dunlap, New York (\$1.00).

One of two new entries in the G&D one-buck hard-cover reprint series, this is a black magic frolic in which the witches and wizards involved practice their fantastic conjuring abetted by all the gadgetry of far-future pseudo-science—as do all-powerful priests that assail them. While neither as witty nor as wise as its prototype, Anatole France's *Revolt of the Angels*, it is fast and clever and mighty engaging, not to mention awash with suspense. You'll have a hard time not enjoying it.

★ ★ ★

BEYOND THIS HORIZON, by Robert A. Heinlein, Grosset & Dunlap, New York (\$1.00).

Genetics takes an appalling going over in this second of the current G&D entries, in which super-pinball-magnate Hamilton Felix gets all fouled up with the strictly scientific powers that be by refusing to wed the mate they insist must bear him a genius child. His demurrage gets him in more fantastic troubles—from duels to virtual civil wars—than a Kefauver investigation. We suspect Mr. Heinlein wrote this one with his muscles rather than his mind. Fortunately he has the biceps and deltoids for it.



The CLUB HOUSE

Where science fiction fan clubs get together.

BY ROG PHILLIPS

LAST MONTH'S CH was written just before starting a long and leisurely drive from New York to California. Now, on May 24th, as I write this, I can look out the windows, past the lazily waving fronds of tropical vegetation and the roofs of houses lower down, at the calm Pacific Ocean as it washes against the beaches at Laguna, forty or so miles south of Los Angeles.

Several times we almost didn't get here. There were the Canadian and U. S. customs inspectors who were curious about four typewriters in the car, on the short jaunt into Canada. They were much easier to satisfy, however, than the California customs inspectors who asked me if I had any vegetable matter (meaning insect bearing vegetables and fruit) in any of the sealed cardboard cartons in the car, and when I assured them there wasn't, ordered me to break them open. Did I? No. It would have taken two hours to unload the car and open up everything.

Naturally on such a long trip, Mari and I stopped to see many people, and also naturally, we didn't stop to see a lot I would have liked to. We went through Evanston and saw Bill Hamling, former editor of *Fantastic Adventures*. Also Bea Mahaffey, managing editor of OW, then up to Amherst, Wisconsin, where we visited with Rap, and with Dick Shaver. As most of you know, Ray Palmer fell a year ago and was totally paralyzed from the waist down. After being in the hospital for several months he began to recover use of his legs. He had become so weakened that it has been taking a long time for him to recover completely. He still can't walk normally, but he can get around without canes, and by summer he should be quite recovered.

It was only a short jaunt from Amherst to St. Paul where we stopped to see Charles De Vet whose stories were rated so well by you readers. He's a wonderful host. And he's working on more stories, so you should see them in print one of these days.

From St. Paul we dropped south and west, seeing quite a bit of flooded country and being detoured around inundated highways. We went through Denver, Colorado, and directly south to Taos where we visited Mac Reynolds, Fred Brown, and Jack

and Dorothy de Courcy. Taos is in a valley surrounded by mountains. The valley itself is over seven thousand feet in altitude. It was a little hard to breathe at times.

I had never met Fred Brown before. He took us up into some of the canyons in his car, and we also went into several with our own car, loaded down with writers and artists. The Rio Grande is just a creek up there.

We went into the pueblo village where the Indians still live as they did when Columbus discovered Key West, Florida. We were told the Indians believe the white man's infiltration of America is temporary, and soon he will be gone.

Taos is also a colony of descendants of some of the first Spaniards to reach the Americas. They still live as their ancestors did, in the tradition of old Spain. Architecture is massive and old. The apartment the Browns live in is centuries old. A Governor of New Mexico was assassinated in what is now their bedroom, if I got it correctly.

Adobe is so prevalent a building material that a square house with straight sides stands out like a sore thumb, and we were solemnly assured that indoor plumbing reduces property value.

I had heard that in many adobe houses the floors are of dirt. For years I had been idly curious to see such a floor. My curiosity is now satisfied. I've seen them. A packed adobe mud with kerosene in it, packed as hard as concrete so it can be swept smooth.

Before going to Taos I had assumed that since it was reputed to be a locality where it was very inexpensive to live we would find all the writers there supervising the dozens of native laborers which they could get at a dollar a day, while those natives built them palatial mansions. Instead, we found that Taos is inexpensive as a place to live because you can pick up an acre of ground and a two-room adobe house for six hundred dollars.

One evening before we left I had a discussion of this with the writers there. I tried to get the viewpoint of these people who had deserted cities and a bathroom next to the bedroom.

They tried to explain to me that it was a revolt against civilization, that each of them individually had become fed up with

cities, and had come here to get back to nature. I couldn't see it, so they told me I wasn't ready for Taos.

From Taos we went westward to Flagstaff and south through Jerome, the most unique town in the world. It's on the side of a mountain. To go through it you must go along the full length of every street in town, since they form a switchback highway up the steep face of the hillside. The entire town of Jerome, streets and all, are sliding down the mountain at a rate of a foot or two a year! Houses are two and three stories high, the top floor opening onto one street, the bottom floor opening out onto another.

We went on through Jerome to Wickenburg and then westward over the four hundred miles of desert to the west coast. And with our trip done we looked back and realized that we couldn't have seen more varied scenery and living if we had toured the solar system.

There were places where the landscape might have been a Bonestell painting of a scene from the surface of the Moon, places where we could well imagine we were on Mars, or Venus. And the place I would like to settle down would be somewhere in Arizona where, in one easy day's-driving in almost any direction, I can be in a different world. A world of cities such as The Los Angeles area, a world of Martian topography like New Mexico, a world of Lunar landscapes like parts of Arizona. That is our Earth.

In the stack of mail waiting for me when I arrived in Laguna Beach was the phone bill—uh...the light bi...ah, here's something that's not a bill. A letter from Carolyn Gabard of 481 Museum Dr., Los Angeles, Calif. Her request will be too late in appearing in this department. She's planning on writing a masters thesis on the subject of stf. She's attending the University of Southern California. I'll turn her over to LASFS to get her material for her MA degree, but I thought you would like to know that stf is now considered acceptable material for study for a Masters degree.

There was also a letter from Don Day, chairman of the Norwescon and editor of Fanscient. He says there will be no Norwescon Memory Book. Instead there is a special issue of Fanscient that will serve the same purpose, priced at fifty cents. Also, after this special issue he will be suspending publication of Fanscient. I hate to see it go. It's one of the nicest fanzines printed. I'll start off the reviews this month with this special issue of it.

FANSICIENT: No. 13-14; 50c; Don Day, 3435 NE 38th Ave., Portland 13, Ore. Norwescon issue. Sixty-four pages, pocket size, printed by photo-offset so that each small page has the contents of an ordinary full size page.

A regular feature is "Author Author"

in which some well known stf author is reviewed. In this issue it's L. Sprague De Camp. A nice full page picture of him, too. And about three pages of titles of his stories and where and when they appeared.

In addition this time a well known stf artist is reviewed. Hannes Bok. It's a refreshing article written by Hannes himself, and presents the artist's side of the picture with great clarity. I know both L. Sprague De Camp and Hannes Bok, but know Hannes considerably better. In fact, he went down to Times Square with Mari and me to see General MacArthur go by in the parade the day I left New York.

Walter Pannell authors an article discussing the problem of language in encountering extraterrestrial civilizations. His contention is that we have had more experience with languages than with science, and languages have been reduced to more or less definite rules. "If space inhabitants approach other scientific subjects according to the principles of science as we know them, then their language approach would be similar—probably not in the matter of using the same words, but according to the same principles." He goes on from there to make a well written and interesting article.

H.T. McAdams is the author of an article on "Numbers, Words, and Ideas". There are several short stories and other interesting articles in this issue. The main feature, however, is "The Norwescon Report" by Don Day. It does what the other reports could not: gives the inside report on preparation for the convention. Those of you who attended the convention saw a smoothly functioning thing, well planned and executed. You couldn't see the difficulties that had been ironed out beforehand; the months of labor that had been gone through. On reading them I wonder that there was a convention at all. And if it weren't for the patient labor of Don Day and Juanita Sharp there probably wouldn't have been.

It was a giant convention. Over four hundred people attended, including Howard Browne and I. And a young lady named Mari Wolf who changed her name about seven weeks later when she married me.

For those of you who attended the convention this issue of Fanscient is a must. Those of you who don't know whether they want to attend the convention this year at New Orleans, if you get this zine and read how much sheer enjoyment you can get out of a stf convention, you will see that it definitely is worth the expense and time to take the long trip to New Orleans.

And for information on the Nolacon, which takes place over the Labor Day weekend in New Orleans, write to Harry B. Moore, chairman, 2703 Camp St., New Orleans 13, La.

CHIMERICAL REVIEW: 15c; Dennis Strong, 942 Scribner NW, Grand Rapids, Mich. April issue. Before I left New York Dennis asked me to write an article on

how to write stf for his zine. I did so, and it appears in this issue.

In many ways I don't consider myself a writer, and when writing an article like the one in Chimerical Review I wonder if I might not be doing more harm than good. In this article, however, I made seven points about writing that I thoroughly believe in, and if those seven points help anyone to become a writer I have done something worthwhile.

That article takes up only two pages of Chimerical Review. There are twenty-five more pages, filled with high class fan fiction for the most part.

Dennis is seriously trying to build a fanzine devoted to GOOD fan fiction, and he's doing a real job. You can help him by sending him your best efforts in fan fiction. You can also help him by subscribing to Chimerical Review. Subscriptions are what pay for the stencils and paper and postage.

SCIENCE FICTION NEWS LETTER: 15c 7/\$1.00; Bob Tucker, P. O. Box 260, Bloomington, Illinois. Bimonthly. The May issue is number twenty. Eight pages of photo-offset printing. It's beginning to out-point Taurasi's newzine in many respects, though no zine can equal Taurasi's in speed of news until it gets his contacts and comes out every two weeks.

The reporting is professionally terse and to the point, and interesting to read. On the front page is a discussion of the convention report for the Nolacon, dealing at length with the problems of travel to New Orleans. Occupying the second column of page one is the announcement of Ackerman and his wife sailing for Europe. Also announced is the publication of a new Hannes Bok art folio which can be obtained by sending three dollars to Bok, P. O. Box 137, Cathedral Station, New York 25. There are two pages of reviews of new stf books and movies. By the way, Bob Tucker has two books coming this year himself: "Red Herring", a mystery novel ready in July, and "The City in the Sea", a stf novel which will be ready in late fall or winter.

Tucker manages to get a surprising amount of information in a few pages. When you finish reading *News Letter* you have a comprehensive picture of things going on in every field related to stf, professional and fan.

RHODOMAGNETIC DIGEST: "being the proceedings of the Elves Gnomes and Little Men's chowder and marching society." Which is misleading since it's a real stfzine, 25c, Don Fabun, 1024 Keith Ave., Berkeley, California.

It sports a thick paper cover of different color than the body of the book, and has forty pages of multilith printing and artwork. Don has plenty of help, judging from the list of assistants. Seven of them. They have plenty of fun getting together

and putting this zine, out.

Bob Silverburg authors an article, "The Perils of Completism". It discusses the fantasy collector. Did you know that since 1923 there have been around three thousand issues of all stf magazines under seventy-five different titles? Bob knows his subject. When you finish reading his article you will see the enormity of the task of collecting every prozine that belongs in such a collection.

"The Whiskey Drinking Mathematician" by Bill Murr is replete with abstruse logic to delight the mind of any null A, or even people. For example, "If a mathematician does not have to wait twenty minutes for a bus, then he either likes Mozart in the morning or whiskey at night, but not both." Bill concludes his article with the profound remark that "the use of symbolic logic in any wide manner depends as initio upon the use of semantically unequivocal statements as elements of the proposition." But in my opinion he stopped too soon, because I don't understand what his proposition was. Probably I don't understand logic.

Don Fabun discusses civilization under the fetching title, "Down in the Dumps." He starts it out with the sentence, "A culture or a civilization may well be judged by the kinds of containers it uses." For myself I think the contents are more interesting. His discussion of the modern art of packaging various commodities, however, is very enlightening.

There's plenty more. An article by Walter A Willis, book reviews, prozine reviews, a letter column...

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c; 12/\$1.00; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 Thirty-second Ave., Flushing, N. Y. The newzine that consistently scoops all others on just about everything, because Taurasi is in regular contact with all editors as to their plans, and is always getting new sources of information. The first April number is the 127th issue, perhaps an all time record for consistent publication.

Occupying a good part of this issue is stfnews from the British Isles. Walter Gillings resigns as editor of Science-Fantasy, a British prozine, to be replaced by Ted Carnell. Also there is the announcement that Life magazine plans a stf article. I read the article yesterday, and while it's well written it is largely a misrepresentation in my opinion. However, for a reporter who knows nothing about stf it was surprisingly well balanced.

Lester Mayer Jr., F-T reporter on movies reports that "Destination Moon" wins "Oscar". Also in the Mayer column is the announcement that Mr. Swope, producer for NBC television has acquired video rights for Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu stories. I'd like to see them.

There's more. Much more. You can read it all by subscribing to Fantasy-Times right now. You get it, read it through in ten minutes, and then you know all that's been

happening for the past two weeks in the field of science fiction. As easy as that.

* * *
FANVARIETY: 10c; 6/50c; W. Max Keasler, 420 S. 11th St., Poplar Bluff, Mo. Bill Venable co-editor. Most entertaining article is "How to Drive Bob Tucker and Taurasi Out of Business", by Redd Boggs, an article on how to make a success of a newzine in the face of such stiff competition. Max writes an especially readable editorial. Bill Rotsler's art really makes the zine all by itself, and there's other fanartists in it too. "Dragon of OM-MU" is a wonderful little fantasy. It wasn't until after I had read it that I noticed it was by Raymond Clancy, which explains it. He's good.

"Fans or Slams" by T.E. Watkins searches for a better name for stf enthusiasts than fan without finding one. There already is one which he doesn't mention. Stfan (pronounced steffan).

This zine follows the lines of the eternally popular fanzine type that Art Rapp used to publish before the armed forces adopted him, and Don Wilson put out before getting interested in higher education. You'll enjoy more than a few chuckles as you read it, and chuckles are worth more than money. The last six pages are the letter department, which makes that department almost a letterzine supplement. And if you've never seen a fanzine and would like to see some of this fan art I've mentioned many times, you can get a whole gallery of it in this one issue. It's the May issue...

* * *
JOURNAL OF SPACE FLIGHT: they forgot to list the price in this March issue, but if I remember correctly it is now 25c. Send your money to the secretary of the Chicago Rocket Society. Michael Conley, 207 S. Addison St., Bensenville, Illinois.

The articles in this zine are serious and written by people who more or less specialize in the subjects they write about. Norman Bowman is the author of the lead article this time, which discusses Silicon as a base for life forms.

Mr. Bowman develops the theme of Silicon and Carbon forming similar compounds. He points out rightly that the bond Silicon forms with itself is much weaker than that Carbon forms with itself, and that that is the reason why Carbon forms such complex but very stable molecules. He says the difference in the strength of a Si-Si bond and a C-C bond is about thirty percent, the latter being the stronger.

He draws some very interesting conclusions about highly developed theoretical Silicon life forms. They would inhale water and exhale Hydrogen as a waste product, for one thing. The atmosphere of a planet whose predominant life form was Silicon based would consist of Hydrogen Nitrogen and water.

But that's just a beginning. Mr. Bowman explores the whole problem of Silicon

based life, and it makes fascinating reading.

A regular department in this zine is Rocket Abstracts, which consists of dozens of excerpts from as many different professional journals of interest to those who study rockets and the problems of space travel.

The last two pages of the zine report the March meeting of the Rocket Society. It's a very much alive club, meeting once a month in downtown Chicago. If you live in or near Chicago you should plan on attending a meeting and see how you like the group.

* * *
TLMA: 25c; 408 W. Bell St., Statesville, North Carolina. Lynn Kickman and Wilkie Conner editors. First issue. Put out by a fan club called the Little Monsters of America. And since a little monster is a youngster, if you are a youngster you can have fun in this club.

Nancy Moore appears in print for the first time in this issue of TLMA with a well written article on "South America, Land of Forgotten Mysteries." Did you know the Amazon is 3,400 miles long? Neither did I. And the back country jungles of the Amazon are King Kong country. As I read her interesting and well written article I thought of a story I read once based on the mysteries of the interior of Korea, land of hidden places, and wondered if the mysteries of the Amazon will remain such until that land becomes a battle field over which armies fight back and forth until there is not a single boulder that hasn't felt the bloody touch of a dying soldier. Perhaps not until then will "civilization" penetrate that land of dark mystery completely.

And speaking of war, Battell Loomis has a story in TLMA, "Winged Victory", that begins with the sentence, "I have suddenly become very fond of war." The Little Monsters were lucky to snag a story from a professional like him.

Manly Banister is the author of an article, "A Philosophical Dissertation on Dianetics". He starts out by saying that Wilkie Conner had asked him to do an article of an anti-dianetics nature, but couldn't very well because he was an incurable fence sitter. But later on in the article he says, "...one gathers the impression that dianetics is not a 'science of the Mind' at all, but is, rather, an intellectual approach to sex...such bawdiness as this has never been equaled in print..." He is obviously writing in a manner calculated to cause pro-dianeticists to rise in arms. Perhaps it will yet come down to a basic argument over whether an engram is a dero. Or maybe it will go even deeper and speculate on whether deros are that way because of engrams...

Elaine Fruchy has a long story, "God and the Grain of Sand" which is along the lines I sometimes try to attain myself: the taking of some well known group of

legends and theories and weaving them together by a new basic hypothesis. I won't spoil it for you by telling what that new hypothesis about God is: that she used, but it's a story worthy of appearance in some prozine.

Altogether the Little Monsters have put out a first issue that sets a standard they'll have a hard time maintaining. And their forming a club for little monsters is a natural. It's the answer. To the subconscious yearnings of all young fans. In all sincerity I hope they see fit to honor me by making me an honorary monster. After all, my old French teacher (whom I studied under during the two weeks it took me to decide I didn't want to learn the language) used to call me *Monseigneur Feeleeps*.

If you just want the zine send a quarter to Lynn Hickman. If you want to join this club send him a dollar. As a member you will receive the magazine, correspondence roster, and become a part of the most promising fan club yet conceived.

HYSTERIA: a one-shot fanzine sent out to a few people and probably not for sale. Its claim to fame is that it is dedicated to Mrs. Rog Phillips, which is, all it says about her. There are two articles. The first isn't worth mentioning. The second is "The Night We Attempted To Communicate With Katherine MacLean by way of Telephone Collect but didn't. Know Her Number."

Now Strong and Kalas and true fans. They've put out a one-shot fanzine. And for those of you who don't know about one-shots, they are fanzines put out on the

spur of the moment by fans, just like ordinary people might get drunk on the spur of the moment. They're composed on the stencil and mimeographed all in one hilarious evening. This one is six pages long. Some one-shots have been over thirty pages long, put together in one evening by a dozen fans, all having the time of their life.

Stf Fandom really grew up around the mimeograph. The very first fan club had one, and for the last quarter of a century fan clubs have flourished, and have been one of the biggest single markets for mimeograph machines and stencils.

For those of you who have never contacted active fandom, it isn't groups of people who sit around trying to decide which story in this issue of *Amazing Stories* is the best. It's people who read science fiction for enjoyment, and who write their own fantasies in prose or poetry or on the drawing board, and enjoy doing that too. In fact, some of them don't even bother reading the current prozines. They stick strictly to fannish activity. Others are seriously striving to become professional writers, and will eventually succeed. Many of the now successful professional writers got their start as fans, and saw their stories in print in fanzines before they sold to prozines.

That's all for this time. There weren't as many fanzines to review this month, probably because they haven't reached me yet from New York. Continue to send them to Z-D at New York. One of these days soon I will have a permanent address and it will be announced here.

—ROG PHILLIPS

THIS MUST NOT HAPPEN!

John Weston

POISED outside the atmosphere at fifty thousand miles, the Aliens surveyed the picture beneath them. Their spheroid was at rest relative to the greenish planet beneath them and their instruments whirled and hummed as the recordings were taken.

"This planet is a paradise," Zun said in the sibilant tones of his kind, "and the degree of civilization must be high. Look at the cities. They alone show the order of the culture. It will be a pleasure to contact these peoples."

"Yes, Zun," the second, Karil, answered in kind, "the meters show atomics. They've reached that stage. I can see rudimentary rockets as well. These people are on their way to higher things. Their planet is truly advanced."

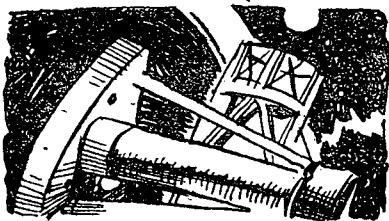
Both watched diligently, poised for days in their vantage point. And as they watched the hopefulness and admiration changed to despair and horror. The sights they witnessed nauseated even them and they had seen sights inconceivable to men. They saw the rockets go up and come down

and they saw the mushrooming blossoms of atomic fission spread over the glorious cities. They saw green valleys scorched into barrenness and their radiation detectors caught the limitless increase of those subtle killers, the lethal alpha, beta and gamma rays.

"There is no point," Zun said, "in our trying to make contact with these sick souls. They have not conquered themselves — just their environment. What an effort they will have to make to regain one speck of their former glory. Don't they have any ethical or moral principles?"

Karil waved a tentacle languorously. "That is evident. It is hardly believable that a world so advanced could at the same time be so degenerate. How is this possible? Our sociologists will really not believe the evidence of their senses."

Zun touched a control stud and the spheroid shot off into the limitless reaches of space and its glistening globular shape resembled nothing so much as a vast tear, symbolic of the sadness the unfeeling universe, in this instant, felt...



WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE..

By Milton Matthew

IF YOU were an astronomer asked to make observations on the eclipse of the Sun, were told to do this on the Alaskan island of Attu in a blinding rain, with the sky completely overcast by clouds, how would you feel? Would you say, "Go to..."?

The recent astronomical group that was actually asked to do this wasn't even fazed by such a weird request, because it specializes in astrophysical observations which don't use telescopes or light! It consists of a bunch of that new breed—the radar astronomers!

To this type of astronomer, the Sun—like any star—is a huge radio transmitter, broadcasting on a large variety of wave-lengths ranging from three centimeter waves to much longer familiar broadcast lengths. The astronomers generally restrict themselves, however, to three centimeter, ten centimeter and sixty-five centimeter waves because the intensity of these are greatest.

The observatory that was set up for this job looked more like an Army radar station with peculiar parabolic "dish" antennas poking into the sky. Everything was covered and protected against the rain, of course. Electrically-driven clock apparatus controlled the focusing of the antennas on the Sun (which was invisible, of course) and continual observations were taken almost as easily as if done with ordinary light. In addition to conventional radio wave observations, bolometers of heat-sensing instruments too were set up to observe the Sun in the invisible infra-red. On all wave lengths the astronomers followed exactly the strong incoming waves which diminished as the Moon came before the Sun and then increased to normal.

Radio astronomy is becoming an important subject and it is fascinating to note that electronics and astronomy are being so well blended. Radio waves are also giving more clues as to the mechanism of the Sun's atomic furnace.

BOMBS ARE NOT ENOUGH!

◦ ◦ *By Leo Lewin*

THAT THE application of atomic energy to the propulsion of submarines is coming along nicely is no secret. The work is well beyond the basic experimental stage and in a matter of months, not years, the U.S. will have a number of underwater killers powered by atomic engines. This is really to be expected since a submarine makes an ideal platform for an atomic engine. Its vast heavy lead batteries can easily be replaced by shielding and some sort of engine, probably akin to a steam turbine or gas turbine whose heat sink is an atomic reactor, can be used as the motivating element.

A quieter research program, however, has been going along with the idea of an atomic engine for aircraft! This, unlike the submarine problem, is considerably more complicated. It is hard to make an atomic engine small because so much shielding must be included to protect the operators. That has been the stumbling block for aircraft. But it is by no means a hopeless case. "NEPA" (nuclear energy for the propulsion of aircraft) is working night and day on ways and means. Some success is being encountered. Probably the first successful installations will be on huge bombers of the B-36 variety.

All of these developments, however, are

merely stepping stones to a much more important one—that of nuclear-propelled rockets! And with each new test this seems more and more feasible. Atomic energy can be limitless and the fuel barriers which prevent rockets from leaving the planet may be eliminated altogether. The actual engine will, of course, be some sort of atomic pile providing incredible amounts of high-temperature heat which will be used to vaporize matter or boil gases—with the ejection of this gaseous matter through conventional rocket tubes. Here the shielding problem is acute, too, as well as the ejection of radioactive matter, but again these things are only a matter of refinement.

It is perfectly possible that the first successful nuclear-energy-propelled "aircraft" may be a rocket—perhaps manned, perhaps not. The driving apparatus of a rocket is about as simple as anything can be, with practically no moving parts or complex apparatus—much simpler indeed than the liquid-fueled rocket which is the mainstay of rocket technology today. With the black war clouds gathering, we are inclined to think of atomic energy only in terms of bombs—fortunately this is not the sole effort that is being made to use it.

The Reader's FORUM



NO EVIL MIND, HIS

Dear Editor:

I was just browsing through the June issue of AS when I came to a letter by one Conrad William T. Johnson, who stated: "Also most of those who avoid looking at covers of that type and call them indecent and sexy have extremely evil minds..."

Now, in the first place, I have always believed that many of your covers were sexy and indecent, and even though the merit of the inside stories made up for these covers and artwork, I tried to get AMAZING to change their policy, which they have done.

While doing such I was under the impression that I was trying to help AS get into a better class, not because I had an "extremely evil mind."

Also Mr. Johnson states that he thought that sex and sexy covers were good, but in the statement which I have quoted above he said that anyone who said that AS had "indecent and sexy covers have extremely evil minds..." Therefore, Mr. Johnson must, according to his own statements have an extremely evil mind, a matter which never would have been questioned anyway.

I would like to say that I enjoy your "Men Behind Amazing" and certainly hope you keep it up.

And also, how about back covers again? AS used to look wonderful with them on.

If anyone wishes to correspond with me, I'm probably the loneliest fan in the state of New York.

Robert Dennis McNamara
50 Plaza Street
Brooklyn 17, N. Y.

No change in policy, Bob; just a wider variety of subject matter in them. Okay?
—ED.

ARS GRATIA ARLINE

Dear Mr. Browne:

You were absolutely one hundred per cent right! About "We, the Machine" of course. It was, well, you can look up the adjectives in any copy of Noah Webster's famed book, and it would deserve the superlatives. Only trouble was, it was too

short. But then that shows how very excellent it was by the mere fact I was sorry to see it end. But I really feel it might have been stretched about four or five thousand words, such was the material it held. It is one of the finest pieces of work I have seen in AMAZING since I first started reading it. (Some three years or so ago). If it ever does come out in book form, it will surely be on my list.

Since I've started, I might as well rate the entire issue:

(1) Well, naturally, it's "We, the Machine."

(2) "Good Luck, Columbus". Also excellent. It was really written with a delicate hand. Let's see more of Mr. Robinson in AMAZING.

(3) "The Sky Was Filled With Light." Now, don't ask me what I liked so much about it, for I really don't know. Maybe it's just that I like stories dealing with people's thoughts. Anyway, it was a perfect sketch.

(4) "When Vengeance Rules": It was only a bit above the next two. What intrigues me is the fact that Creighton managed to keep his heroes from falling in love in the most unlikely places and situations. In fact, except for references to Gregor's long-dead mother, there was not a woman in the story. In most cases there would be a girl (beautiful, of course) from Huk's place who sang there, but was basically good at heart, and followed along. And instead of the last line, which really was a perfect ender, there would have been something like this: "He looked deep into her lovely eyes, and knew that they now could be together forever." Or something to the effect that all this was so he could kiss a girl with the earth as a watcher.

(5) "You'll Die on Ganymede,"—interesting enough, with a nice little plot, but somehow or other, it was oddly reminiscent of a Western, with the gallant ranger protecting the Indians from having the bison, only source of life, killed off by the unscrupulous renegade. Only this time the bison were rational creatures. But it was rather good.

Also a tie is "What Price Gloria?" which had its funny moments, and reminded me strongly of early Virginia, when the women came over from England to get their men.

'Nuff said on the issue, which with two excellent, one nearly excellent, and everything else good, was something gaining a rating of very good, or as they say in school, B plus.

Now to rip into the letter column. First Mr. Kilgore. On one account I agree with him. Namely the BEMs chasing the Terran cuties. How right he is. Oh, how I love people who are cynics. (I'm a sort of combination cynic and idealist, if you can imagine such a thing.) They are so much fun, especially when they wax sarcastic. But as for the short features, why all fact? You had a nice combination this issue, with your "vignettes" all good—none of the former trash there. That little "Seeds of Destruction" bit for instance. Or "Who Plays With Fire". Need I say more?

To Mr. Burdell, and all others like him, what is meant when brickbats are sent to AS and FA about the "lewd covers" is merely that why for the sake of all that's holy does the artist have to show a girl running around in a nightie on top of a high mountain, and being chased by a man dressed in fur parka, boots, and carrying a portable electric stove? I can recall one instance (no, not a Ziff-Davis magazine) in which a girl was outside a rocketship in mid-space, near the rocket tubes, dressed in an abbreviated version of the Bikini, with only a plastic helmet on her hair, while the man behind her was wearing a space suit, to the last little rivet. To get back to AS, there is no law declaring that an artist may not illustrate on the cover, the scene he says he is illustrating. Lately, both AMAZING and FANTASTIC have improved in this respect, their covers showing scenes from the lead novels, or being suggested by the theme of the lead novels, (as per the November issue of AMAZING, with the giant hand and space ship cover for the novel, "All Heroes are Hated"). And as for the rest of his letter, namely about the "superfluous ornaments" women wear, well has he ever looked into his suit to see the false shoulders, or the toupee on his head?

Incidentally, you seem to be having quite a controversy on the flying saucers in the Reader's Forum, and among teens yet. So as another teen, I'd like to say just a few words. No one can really say, for sure, exactly what these saucers are—were, but if, as was once expounded, they are manned by denizens of another world, it would be quite logical that at least one ship would have landed, and tried to make contact with us. As for the objects reported before air flight, there are such things as heat lightning and the Aurora Borealis. From what I have read, most of these were seen at dawn or dusk. Ever see a sunset? Sometimes when the clouds get pink enough, they can look like anything, including giant cigars. What is more, several of the eye-witness reports can often be on the same level as a little girl I once knew, who had an invisible parrot. And oh, what retelling can do to a simple statement of fact! I once got on a horse that decided to jump

a brook, and told it to my friend. Three days later, I heard the same story about a city girl (as it now turned out to be) who got on an unbroken horse which tried to kill her. How the story had changed. But as far as I am concerned, the only person who is qualified to say exactly what the saucers are, is the guy who goes in one. Maybe they're just the results of persons trying to do without their glasses.

I just thought of something upon seeing Anthony Lauria's letter. The perfect solution would be for you to go on printing what covers you think are best, and if we, the readers, don't like them, we can put an old newspaper about the cover, or tear it off.

Arline Gingold
60 Elm Street
Ellenville, N. Y.

For the first time within this editor's memory, one of our stories pleased every reader who took the trouble to write a letter about that particular issue. We're referring to Vance's "We, The Machine", and naturally—in view of the forecast we made about it—such unanimous praise pleased your editor almost as much as it did the author himself.... Robinson's "Good Luck, Columbus!" was only a step or two behind, insuring the young admiral a warm welcome at this office for his future stories. —Ed.

WHO LIES THERE?

Dear Editor:

I've bought your latest issue of AMAZING STORIES and I think that the cover is a little better than you have been putting out for the past 3 years. The main story is too short, yes 30,000 words sounds like a lot but remember "Gods of Venus", "Man From Yesterday", "The Star Kings", "So Shall Ye Reap", "Prometheus II", and quite a few others that were of novel length. As for comparing "Who Sows the Wind" with "So Shall Ye Reap" it's completely wrong. "Who Sows the Wind" was not even half the size of the other and as for quality, nothing doing.

You promised the readers that AS would very soon be streamlined. That was a year ago; now in your current issue you try to tell your bread and butter that it can't be done. I know, the cost of paper—lies, lies, and more and more lies. What about GALAXY? Okay, raise the price a dime providing you give us longer novels and much more of them. Cut out features and the Club House to give more room for enjoyable stories instead of trash that belongs in a science fiction magazine. The least you can do immediately is trim the edges.

Thank you at least for waking up to the idea of advertising your latest issues and forthcoming ones. Once upon a time you were a real good magazine, but ever since "The Brain" you're falling over. By the way, your latest, "We, The Machine" is quite similar—strange isn't it?

Coming down to business, I would ap-

preciate it very much if you would let me know if you still have January, February, March 1947 issues. I would like to buy them. Please inform me on the price, too. They were the good old days.

Edward Joseph McEvoy
54-60. 43rd Street
Maspeth, N. Y.

No lies, Mac—not ever! The cost of paper is only one item in a long list. What about Galaxy—the fact that it runs serials? Our readers have said flatly they want no continued stories. At the time we ran such novels as "Gods of Venus", "The Man From Yesterday", etc., we had more pages to fill than we have these days. —Ed.

THE PURE IN HEART

Dear Mr. Browne:

I've at last plucked up courage to write to your mag and voice a few opinions from the other side of the water.

As I serve in the British Air Force I can't get hold of a typewriter, which I'm told may jeopardize any chances of this letter being published, but I'm hoping.

Prospects have brightened very much in the last year as regards stf. mags in this country, I can now get AS and FA every month and what a treat it is! During the war and the years following, most American stf. mags were unobtainable. I searched everywhere for them with little success but lately everything's fine.

I only read American mags, as I think British efforts on the whole stink, although I try to be patriotic.

In '47 and '48 I managed to get about half a dozen copies of AS and by means of subtle exchange managed to get the three stories I liked most on my bookshelves for good, namely "The Star Kings", "So Shall Ye Reap," and "Prometheus II".

Does my memory fail me of late or don't they write stories like that anymore? The only very good lead I have read that even approaches some of the classics of '47 and '48 is Bob Abernathy's "The Ultimate Peril" which set me dreaming of past glories.

Your covers are o. k. Keep them as they are; after all, a cover is designed to catch the eye and boost sales—a real stf fan would buy it for the reading matter, not the cover.

The short articles were much better when in fiction form than they are now. I thought that some of the ideas in them were the most promising and original in the issue.

As to the stories of late, most are good altho' none approach some of the epics of three, four years ago. What's happened to Don Wilcox? His "Giants of Mogo" was terrific, but since then nary a whisper has been heard in England.

"You Can't Escape From Mars" was not very good, but P. F. Costello's "The Illusion Seekers" was way up from the general run of late. Gerald Vance's "Vanguard of the Doomed" had a good theme

and started well, but tailed off into a gangster's and private eye shooting match—awful.

Rog Phillips' "Weapon From The Stars" stank. What's happened to Rog? Most British fans I talked with agree that "So Shall Ye Reap" is the best stf story ever written, but his last effort shames him.

The best of the shorts have been "Sword of Peace" and "The Unexpected Weapon." Both are different, the latter being in the style of Van Vogt, who is one of the best. Why print things like "Mr. Lahr says his prayers?" If you like fairy stories, start a separate mag for the kids. The same applies to FA which I think is going down fast. "The Handyman", "Tink Takes Over", and "Diana and the Golden Ring" aren't fit to be printed in an adult mag. Fantastic and fairy stories are not the same thing.

I hate to say this, because AS always has been my favorite mag, but you could take a lesson from ASF on the purity of your reading matter. That mag without fail keeps to the straight and narrow. It is a real stf mag and does not dabble in fairy stories.

I've griped enough about your mag, so here's something about the two stf films that have appeared over here. I can't describe "Rocketship XM" without fear of annoying the censor. The story could have been quite good, but oh, those scientific facts! "Destination Moon" was a film, no plot unhappily, but the science in it gladdened my heart. Combine the plot of one with the factual accuracy of the other and you'd have something real good.

I have heard rumours that that stf. classic "When Worlds Collide" is being filmed. Oh boy!

The staid and sober British Broadcasting Corporation is actually running a stf serial on Sunday afternoons. Things are sure looking up over here! Here's hoping I can read many more of your editions and I'd like to see this on your Reader's page if only for the thrill of seeing my name in print.

Michael G. Skinner

64 Mount Rd.

New Malden, Surrey, England

We hope never to be regarded as editors of a magazine that keeps "to the straight and narrow." Sounds too much like the description of a rut—or a grave! —Ed.

WHO GOES WHERE?

Dear Ed:

This last issue is *tres bon* as they say elsewhere, especially Gerald Vance's "We, The Machine". Not that humanity ever will go that way. It's too bad you do not know the future, or your selectivity would be better. A knowledge of the fundamental principles of the universe and the way it is run would help, too. Expect to see Roger Phillips and Mari soon and chew some fat on that score.

How about some more funny stories as in the good old days; and crummy inventions? The cover this time is good, outside the BEM hand.

Frederick G. Hehr
1447-D Stanford
Santa Monica, Calif.

So far we've met no one who can say with any degree of certainty—or even logic!—which way humanity will go. As for the fundamental principles of the Universe lighting the way: first we'll have to find out what they are before we can use them! —Ed.

HOW'S THAT AGAIN?

Dear Sir:

Everything is fine with AMAZING STORIES. Your drawings are very good, but I like to see young boys and men dressed neatly in high boots and smart breeches. It makes 'em look like he-men. Please see that the artist has more guys wearing boot breeches with high top boots.

Ed. Moyer
Dixie Tourist Home
Archer, Florida

GIVE THAT MAN LIFE!

Dear Ed:

Congratulations on a very fine March issue. When I first saw the cover on the newsstand I thought, oh, brother, what a time I'm going to have getting through this one. My fears were realized when I read your lead novel, "Beyond the Rings of Saturn". I've never read a worse story by Robert Moore Williams. What a scare you gave me! But thanks to P. F. Costello and Rog Phillips, the magazine turned out to be the best we've seen in a while. Credit also goes to the rest of the wonderful short stories. They were all good.

Costello's yarn, "Whom the Gods Destroy" should have been your lead novel. It was very well written and had a good plot. Even better, an exquisite piece of work indeed, was Rog Phillips' "You'll Die Yesterday". What a plot. This was the best time-trap story I have ever read. Please, oh, please, keep up the good work, for the sake of all your faithful, and mostly silent, readers.

My main purpose for writing this letter, however, (and for this reason I hope to see it in print) is to ask whether or not there are any science-fiction fans in this area; preferably teen-age as I myself am only sixteen. If there are any, let's hear from them. I would like very much to communicate with them. Also, will someone please tell me if there are any fan clubs in the Corona area? From all I've heard, science fiction seems to be entirely dead around here. How about it, fans?

In closing may I say you have one of the best pulp mags on the stands today, and rapidly improving. Though I have seen better from time to time, your inside illos

and stories are constantly outstanding. Your covers could stand improving. Let's see some like the November 1950 issue and the June mag. Your May cover wasn't too bad. One more important point. You have the liveliest readers' column of any magazine on the stands. That shows a real interest in your mag.

Charles Lear
2687 So. Byron Street
Corona, California

It's the letter writers who keep the Forum alive and sparkling. And the more we get, the more we'll print. And, so long as the writers stay within the bounds of good taste, letters will not be cut. —Ed.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Dear Editor:

May I come in for a second? Not to gripe because I find nothing in the AMAZING magazine to gripe over.

I've read your magazine ever since I was a young 'un and had to swipe it after my father left for work. When I start the magazine, I read from cover to cover. Some stories don't equal others, but in my estimation they are all good. I figure they have to be somewhat good to be in the magazine.

As for the covers, I like each and every one. They are varied enough to please anybody. I don't believe the slightly sexy covers should raise such a big fuss amongst the readers. One writer wrote... quote: "I still have the courage to brave the pitying glances of my dealer and friend, the corner druggist. I simply cannot face my wife and children anymore." "And so to save the last shreds of my dignity, I tear off the cover as soon as I have bought my copy." Unquote. It's ridiculous to buy a magazine, if you feel like that. I'm so happy that I can go in a book store, buy whatever I please, regardless of the cover, and don't care what anybody thinks because I pay for it and read it.

So I've had my say and am happy even if this never makes the Reader's Forum. As long as your magazine is on the stands, I'll always buy it and enjoy it.

Clara B. Cummings
705 1/2 Pike Street
Seattle 1, Washington

Thank you!

—Ed.

WANTED: BOTTOMLESS PITS

Dear Mr. Browne:

I don't imagine my letter will rate space in the Reader's Forum, because it pertains to what is known as "old stuff". But, some time back, both AMAZING and FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, were running a series of those "much needed, much wanted" Shaver stories, and the subject of discussions at that time was Caves. The Reader's Forum was filled with fans writing about mysterious caverns throughout the USA.

At that time, I also wrote in, and tried to make contact with interested parties, for making explorations of said "caverns", but was stricken with polio and hospitalized.

What I'm trying to say, and am botching up the works in doing so, is that how may I find out whether there are any such caves or holes-in-the-ground, in the vicinity of the District of Columbia, Maryland or Virginia? I'm interested and curious enough to make a "solo" expedition, if there isn't anyone else still interested. But this information must have some sort of proof, that such caves do exist, because I don't want to make a trip to the locality for nothing.

As a last word, if anyone else is interested, I'll be glad to talk it over, and be darn glad for the company.
P.S. I speak only of unexplored and supposedly bottomless caves.

Jim Martin
1749 Park Road, N. W.
Washington, D. C.

Have fun, Jim.

—Ed.

WAS THERE A LOVECRAFT?

Dear Sirs:

I have been a reader of science-fiction and fantasy-fiction since 1936, and have some older magazines dating back to 1926. I think your publication is one of the very best. During all this time, I have never written a "letter to the editor" but now I am doing so because I have a real question to ask.

I have read numerous references in AMAZING and FANTASTIC to F. P. Lovecraft and his "we are property" philosophy. However, I have never seen any definite reference to his works, nor can I find anything by him at the library here. My question is: Was he a real person or a fictitious reference which has come into general use? If he was real, and did write expounding on the property concept, where can one find his writings, and are they published in book form at all?

I am fascinated by that concept, and would like very much to read some of his works, if they really exist.

I don't know if you can answer such letters as these or not, but if you can, I would certainly appreciate an answer to my questions.

Dr. N. F. Stambaugh
U. S. N. H.
Philadelphia, Pa.

Lovecraft was real—and we refer you to the man who probably is the greatest authority on his work in the world today: August Derleth, Arkham House, Publishers, Sauk City, Wisconsin.

—Ed.

ATTN: ALL FANS

Dear Mr. Browne:

I should like to call to your attention,

and I shall appreciate your letting your readers know, that I am at work on a Dictionary of Science-Fiction terms. I shall be happy to hear from any of your readers who may care to suggest words for inclusion in such a compilation. I am including new words, existing words in new combinations and existing words that are given new applications or meanings.

Readers should send, for each word, the meaning, the author, the title of the story, and the date of its publication.

I have a staff engaged in collecting science-fiction terms, but always in such projects, considerable help comes from the suggestions of interested readers.

For your information: I am author of the "Dictionary of Word Origins". Collier's magazine for September 1, 1950, had an article about me as "the word detective". Further details are in "Who's Who in America".

Joseph T. Shipley
29 West 46 Street
New York 19, N. Y.

Get set, Mr. Shipley; your present mailbox is much too small!
—Ed.

SOUTH OF 38

Dear Ed,

While sitting here two miles south of the 38th parallel and reading every word of your May issue of AS, and praying that my next issue of s-f will show up in the next mail, I have this to say: I have been reading AMAZING STORIES since the early twenties and did have a library of three years stacked up at one time, but when I was shipped to Japan I gave them all away. We have had the hardest time of anyone getting issues of AS, and I didn't start getting any until I had my sister put in for a year's subscription, and now I receive them every month. You should see the magazines a week after I read them.

Well, this is the first letter I have ever written to an ed of any mag, so all I can say is keep up the good work, and to Mrs. Name Withheld, did she ever see anyone who did not like to look at a well turned figure?

Sgt. O. B. Casper
c/o Postmaster
San Francisco, California

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Dear Mr. Browne:

In regard to Dale Lord's article, "Stars at Noon" on page 158 of the May issue: One sentence reads, "In addition, if we use infra-red or ultra-violet sensitive film———" All film, including color emulsions are sensitive to ultra-violet, but I cannot see where this is any gain. Firstly, ultra-violet light is the most widely dispersed by atmospheric haze. Secondly, light below 360 mmu is not transmitted by op-

tical glass which, with the visible spectrum beginning at approximately 400 mmu, permits little ultra-violet to reach the emulsion without use of quartz lenses throughout. I agree, however, on the use of infra-red which is virtually unaffected by haze.

The issue on the whole was up to its usual standards of excellence, although "Vampire of the Deep" should have, in my opinion, been consigned to FA.

As far as the cover question goes, girls in one stage of undress or another are pretty well established except for purely technical magazines and the National Geographic, so why should AS and FA be orphans?

W. A. R. Edgcomb, FN
CGC Ivy, PO Box 810
Astoria, Oregon

Writer Lord is invited to comment on Expert Edgcomb's remarks. —Ed.

HOW THEY STACKED UP

Dear HB:

You asked for opinions on "We, The Machine". Okay you're getting mine. It was excellent! I won't go into reasons, because you stated them better than I could. Only one complaint. It seemed to slow down somewhere in the middle. Without that it would have been a classic.

Second place to "Good Luck, Columbus". Are you sure that was Robinson's first sale? There was a story by him named

"The Maze", which I read around a year ago.

Third, to the Hickey story, fourth to "What Price Gloria?", and the two novellettes are tied for a very low last.

Letters interesting as usual, but the comments were generally on the January ish. Last issue's missives were aimed at the March issue, and one (my own, and thanks) concerned itself with the April ish. What gives?

The cover—ah, the cover. In risk of repeating myself, EXCELLENT!! Not only is it wonderfully drawn, with great care given to detail, but it even illustrates a scene from the story. Ex—, no I believe I already said that!

James Lynch
2630 Penn Avenue, N,
Minneapolis, Minn.

Robinson's first sale was to us, but we held the story for some time before using it.... Reader Lynch's rating of the July issue pretty well matches the consensus of most letters for that month. —Ed.

CONVERT....

Dear Sir:

I am one of the intellectual types, and I have always considered all fiction magazines a lowly form of literature. Nevertheless, I have been always the greatest fan of science fiction, and I was practically

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464. SILVERLOCK by John Myers

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despairing of ever finding a science-fiction book that I have not yet read, when it struck me that under many of the science-fiction stories I have read there was a little-subscript "copyright 'AMAZING STORIES'" or something to that effect. In my despair, with guilty conscience I bought a copy of AMAZING STORIES, thinking what a man won't do when he gets an stf habit into his veins, and to my surprise I found the first story, "We, The Machine" to rank among the best I have read. I cannot think of many stories as good as "We, The Machine" but one of them is "Good Luck, Columbus". The latter did not have as much philosophy to it as the former, but I liked its exactness of detail which made it completely undistinguishable from a story written by an eye witness. In "You'll Die on Ganymede" however, the front page illustration made me delay reading of the story for tomorrow. I don't like the intelligent beast of Earth stories, even if the beast is on another planet, which makes it more impossible. In other words, I don't like science stories contradicting science or scientific probabilities.

I glanced through the mail and I saw that your present problem is sex or no sex, and most are against it. I join their ranks as long as "sex" does not mean "love" and vice versa.

In one of the editor's answers, I noticed that you are looking for so-called new talent. Probably by a typographical mistake you dropped an "s"—or did you? Anyway you are talking about two talents: one, literary, and the other a talent for typewriting. I have a vivid imagination, and I'm no woolly thinker, but although I play the piano, I'm puzzled about how you work the typewriter keyboard. So I guess I won't send you my manuscripts until I learn to type.

One suggestion, though. The appearance of AS typographically is flawless (who

paints the pictures?) but the paper is much below the dignity of the aristocrat of stf magazines. I would willingly pay fifty cents for a copy if it meant a decent paper and more distinguished (or do I mean harder?) covers. The present ones bend and tear so easily, and many fans would like to keep those cover illustrations together with the contents. I understand that it will meet with much opposition, but you can persuade them, can't you? After all, aristocratic magazines aren't supposed to be cheap, are they?

The format or the size of AS would be more convenient if it was smaller—pocket-size.

Paul Wyszkowski
129 Lawton Blvd.
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

The type of paper now being used in both Amazing Stories and Fantastic Adventures is a vast improvement over the former stock.... The bulk of our readers prefer improvements to be directed toward story quality rather than the format itself. In this day of high prices, we're continuing to hold the line. —Ed.

AGENT LAWRENCE REPORTS

Dear Mr. Browne:

Can't help it, I just had to get out the "hunt and peck" and get in on the act. Re this matter of covers... Me, I don't mind the unclothed fems or the monsters since I normally don't have to carry them home from the store. Far be it from me to deprive the menfolk of their pleasures, but out of curiosity, I wanted to see what the men thought of them. Having a half hour wait for my husband, I stationed myself in a magazine store and watched the s-f counter. There was a very brisk business going on...but...I noticed that about 90% of all the customers, both male and female, with quite a large emphasis on the male, were buying the mags, and very rapidly (making like amateur magicians) sliding them inside a newspaper or pocket. I rather think that possibly most of us (s-f fans) would prefer less lurid covers. After all, there are some people who have not been bitten by the virus (much more deadly than a mere bug) of science fiction, and what they must imagine when they see the covers!

This letter probably grows more incoherent by the second, since the two year old on my left loves typewriters. By the way, she thinks your covers are fair game for scissors, altho she doesn't injure the contents.

Thus ends my discourse on the covers, which are after all (will I be slaughtered by the artists?) secondary to the literature inside. I love to read—almost anything—primarily for relaxation. I love your mags except for one thing; I lose too much sleep because I lack the will power to put them down after starting an issue. I must admit

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that, despite my bio-chem major at college I dislike long-winded theories, and much prefer the amusing stories. I suppose I am an escapist, but after wrestling with the problems of a home all day long, I want my hour or two at night with a book or mag that I enjoy. Your mags have given me many happy hours, but alas, I read so fast that when I put down an issue the time has flown by and I am left with a slightly frustrated feeling, because there isn't any more.

The fictional short features are great. I won't attempt to list my pet stories; if I like them, fine; if not, the heck with them. Since I do like most of them that is a minor detail.

At any rate, this is long enough; I have written my first fan letter, and this is it. Our thanks for a couple of excellent mags and we shall assuredly remain faithful readers.

Do you publish separate book length novels?

Mrs. Marion Lawrence
3512 Victoria Street
Pittsburgh 3, Pa.

Our cover "policy"—for want of a better word—is now pretty well set, and can be summed up in one word: variety. ... Science fiction's purpose, like the purpose of all fiction, is primarily for entertainment and relaxation—a fact that many readers seem to forget.... We publish no separate book length novels. —Ed.

WHO'S CRAZY NOW?

Dear Sirs:

I have been reading AMAZING STORIES for some time, and thought it about time to put my two cents in.

All of my friends think I'm a little crazy for reading the stories, and always kid me, but I come back with: "You just wait—the first rocketship that lands from Mars, I'll just jump on it and you all can stay on earth and be blown to bits from an atomic bomb." Then they know I'm crazy and leave me alone.

About your covers on AS, I like a cover that illustrates part of the main novel. Like the one for the July issue 1951. The green hand is in the story just like the circular room that Lorn almost fell into. And I like sex on a cover. You must admit it does attract the eye. And that's what you want, something eye-catching, interesting and something you'll look at twice.

R. C. Johnson
1223 W. Main Street
Fort Wayne 7, Indiana

If reading stf is an indication of insanity, then Reader Johnson has some distinguished company! —Ed.

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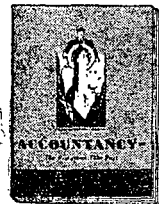
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PIRATES OUT OF SPACE

An "Amazing" Vignette

By

E. Bruce Yaches

THEY'RE A welcome sight, those bulky astro-domes, as they swing across your sighter. The minute you spot them from your rocket ports, you know you're on course and the audio chatters the welcome greeting seconds later, listing course and position. The astro-domes have made interplanetary travel a lot simpler and more automatic.

It was morning, I.P. time, which doesn't mean a lot, when I woke up and saw the massive bulk of the Sun on my quarter. I yawned and stretched, as best I could in the small hulk of the patrol craft. I went to the rear bulkhead and dragged out my rations, keeping one eye cocked on the port. Sure enough, a black dot appeared across the filtered bulk of the Sun and I knew it was the Merc-dome, number one in the chain which ran across the System. Merc-dome's job was important and it was a busy way station, guiding and signaling the numerous freighters which took the sunward plunge to arc across to the outer planets and their satellites, storing up the potential of gravitation.

The speaker stuttered and clucked and from a million kilometers away, the Merc-dome spoke: "Merc-dome One to Patroller... Signal picked up... check on course... relaying message from Mercury, quote: 'Patroller land at once', unquote... that is all..."

The speaker's chuckle died and I stared at it, puzzled. What was the matter with Herbie and Liane? They were on duty, I knew, and they knew me and my patroller. Why so curt? That message didn't make sense. And why should the Mercurian base want me to land? That meant a swing of twenty million kilometers back on course and I knew there were other patrollers a lot closer. Something was definitely wrong here.

I stepped over to the control panel and cut my automatic signalling 'mitter to "gradual die", knowing that as my signal faded the Merc-dome would conclude it was vanishing with distance. Visually they'd never pick up the arc of my tiny craft. And at the same time I opened up for the Merc-dome.

As I approached the Merc-dome I knew instantly something was haywire. Clustered around the lock of the hundred meter sphere were a half dozen small space-craft and a hundred kilometers to the rear, that is, sunwards, hovered the massive bulk of a freighter. This was crazy. Ships never stopped at astro-domes except for genuine emergencies. I knew what I was seeing, all right. This was out and out piracy and whoever was doing it had guts all right—but of course that one looted freighter would make it more than worthwhile. Evidently the first pigeon had been lured so easily they were tempted to try more. Well they'd made a big error this time.

I hit the ultra-wave key and shot through an emergency call to the Mercurian base. They'd have cruisers out here in a hurry. Then I went into action.

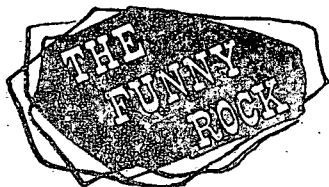
Playing the controls like the console-keyboard they were, I barreled in toward the cluster of small spacecraft concentrated at the entry-lock. Two micro-atomics from the nose cannon were enough! Even the lock section of the Merc-dome stove in under the blast, but the damage was relatively minor; the spacecraft wouldn't move though!

I did a quick arc out to the freighter which under close inspection was as riddled as a tin-can—probably half the crew dead too.

The rest was anti-climactic; I sat around the Merc-dome and waited for the Patroller cruisers to show up. Two or three of the pirates tried a suit-dash—why, I don't know—they could go anywhere even if they got free—and I slapped a beam on, giving them quite a ride in the process.

After that the pirates quietly surrendered. They knew the futility of resistance.

When I finally got Herbie and Liane on the 'mitter I learned they hadn't been roughed up much... "Tell them next time they try to pirate from a dome, they should try being friendlier... that's what aroused my suspicions..." I could hear the two of them laughing...



ONE OF NATURE'S most closely locked secrets is the mystery of natural magnetism. Electromagnetic theory has been able to shed little light on this. No one knows what magnetism is. It is even more elusive than the electric current. Another mystery has been added to an already mysterious picture with the discovery that at some time in the past, in several places on the Earth, the natural magnetic field appears to have reversed itself.

Magnetic study begins properly with the study of the lodestone, natural ferric-ore rocks which are magnetized and which may account ultimately for the Earth's magnetic field. Lodestones are common, are found all over the world, and were used for making compass needles before electromagnetism was discovered. Large deposits of rock are often highly magnetic too. And of course, as you would expect, the south-seeking poles of these magnetic rocks point south.

Recently, however, scientists have come upon deposits of weakly magnetized rock whose south magnetic poles pointed in a northerly direction just as if the magnetized rock had been lifted and turned around some time in the past. Now this was manifestly impossible, as geologic examination disclosed. There were no faults or crevices indicating such a reversal. Obviously there is only one conclusion. The Earth's magnetic field must have temporarily reversed itself!

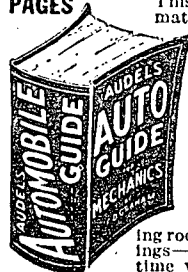
Since it is obviously not true that the entire Earth's magnetic field made this reversal, it must have been a local phenomenon. The most logical hypothesis assumes that Earth-currents were responsible for it. That is to say, large powerful electric currents, somehow induced to flow in the Earth, created a reversing magnetic field which naturally opposed and weakened the magnetic field of the lodestone in the vicinity. What caused these Earth-currents can only be guessed at.

Atmospheric electricity may have some connection in this chain of events. But so far no exact way has been found to explain the change of magnetic field. The importance of answering these questions comes from the desire of science to get some clue as to what magnetism is. It is believed that in a solution to this problem lies the answer to many of the most difficult problems of atomic physics. Somehow magnetism is linked with the basic nature of the atom. Crack this difficulty, and you get a clue to the fundamental building blocks of the universe—little magnetons!

—By Frank Crain

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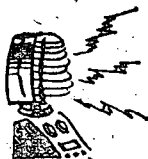
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THE WIRES ARE DOWN

By Fred Mason

SLOWLY, almost imperceptibly, another one of those small but, influential technological revolutions is taking place. Up until comparatively recently the work-horse of the telephone, radio and television world was the unglamorous copper wire, the buried coaxial cable. Hundreds of thousands of miles of these lines, buried in the ground, suspended from millions of poles, have converted the country—and the world—into a tight communications net. The messages, music and entertainment that spread across the country travel their silent way on wire for the most part—now.

But micro-wave radio is slowly but surely replacing the use of wire. Relay stations spaced from ten to a hundred miles apart with the average being around forty miles, depending on the curvature and nature of the terrain, do all the carrying without intervening wires. Efficient, capable of transmitting many more channels of information, cheaper per mile to build, automatically maintained by robot instrumentation, these micro-wave radio relay stations depend upon the line-of-sight properties of ultra-high frequency radio waves. They work so well that hardly any long lines of wire are built any more. Now, driving about the country, you see metal and concrete towers surmounted by little parabolic "dishes" or antennas. Changing them in, expanding the net, cutting them in and out, is simple and fast. The copper wire has gone the way of the buffalo!

BY A GNAT'S HAIR!



By Ray Morrow

TRADITIONALLY the most accurate way of measuring length or distance involves the use of an interferometer, a big name for a simple gadget which uses light waves. Light waves make a superb measuring tool because they are so small—visible light having a wave-length measured in millionths of an inch. This, coupled with the fact that light waves interfere or reinforce each other, depending upon their "phase" or relation with each other, permits incredibly accurate measuring in many fields, ranging from the distances of stars in astronomy, to the dimensions of an atom. Optical comparison methods are science's most refined tool. Or were!

Recently some applications of radar have been made which threaten to replace conventional optical methods. Certain gases are extremely sensitive to radar waves,

absorbing their energy when they are of the same wave-length as the gas they are irradiating. Electronic instruments can easily show when this sensitive resonance peak is reached. By measuring the power absorbed from the waves in a given distance a nice correlation between that distance and the power can be obtained. Presto, you have a new and hyper-accurate measuring apparatus.

The prime use of the new device will be in atomic physics where distances are much smaller than anything we've dealt with hitherto. The radar absorption measuring gadget will be a thousand times more accurate than anything known—including a gnat's hair!

● THAT MAKES IT HARD ●

H EAT-TREATING metals with radio waves (induction hardening) is standard practice throughout the world. Steel, aluminum, copper and a thousand alloys are given any desired degree of hardness, ductility, resistance to flexure or any other qualities. The mechanism of the process is still not understood fully—but it works. Equally mysterious but also promising is a method of heat-treating metals by direct bombardment with beams of electrons much as in the sterilization process of foods.

A high voltage electronic Van de Graff generator sends streams of electrons hurling into metal objects. Depending upon the duration of the blast and its intensity, the metal's properties can be exactly controlled. This process is going to be of great importance because it seems to affect the metals much more, altering their internal structure in some subtle way. It appears as though this is not simply an alteration of the crystalline characteristics of the metal but rather a changing of the atomic structure itself.

Because alloys of metals are now more important than the basic metals themselves, heat treatment of any kind is of major importance. The electronic bombardment method, while still experimental, seems to offer the most impressive results of any methods so far used. In connection with atomic physics and radioactivity it has also been discovered that metals have their properties affected by nuclear bombardment. This is still a largely unknown quantity. Something may come of it, though.

The development of rocket motors with the consequent need for refractory metals has led to the creation of ceramic coated metals, another phase of metal-working that is changing and increasing the usefulness of a variety of alloys. Metallurgical analysis is a wide open field which the future heat-treating methods have come a long way since primitive Man fire-hardened his wooden spear by sticking it in a smouldering charcoal fire!

—Glenn Otis



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TOO MUCH DEATH?

Verne Fantom

IT'S HARD to couple the word "baby" with atomic bombs, but apparently the scientists are doing just that, according to reports filtering through to the public scientific journals. It has been a mistaken belief of many people that an atomic explosion could be nothing but super-gigantic. This is erroneous. Under suitable conditions atomic bombs can be made in almost any size whatsoever. The determining factor is purely a matter of intended use.

With our stock-pile of bombs building up at a terrific rate, we have reached the point where there is in one respect an excess of destructive power. After all, how many cities are there available to be destroyed? Consequently, the military is seeking a way of minimizing the explosive effects of the bomb so that it can be used against small objectives in a tactical way.

Controlling the explosive effect of a bomb, theoretically, is a simple matter. The violence with which an atomic bomb detonates is dependent upon the velocity with which two critical masses of the uranium element are brought together. This is so because the greater the inter-penetration of the masses, the more violent the ensuing explosion which takes place in fractional millionths of a second. When it takes place too quickly, the explosion dissipates the exploding elements into small chunks and fragments before they've had time to fission! If you want a terrific explosion, you drive the critical masses into each other as rapidly as possible—if you want a small blast you send them toward each other at a slower rate.

Already we hear talk of atomic artillery shells and aerial bombs. It is rumored that the recent atomic explosions were small ones, tests of these very principles. The one terrifying facet of these lesser explosions is the realization that, just like the big ones, they throw around large quantities of radioactive materials, so far the big unknown of atomic explosions.

If hydrogen bombs can be made (perhaps have been made), then very likely they too can be constructed in various sizes. In this case it appears that vastness, unlimited destructive ability almost, will be the order of the day. If a moderate amount of hydrogen can be detonated, perhaps any quantity at all can be exploded. If this is true, our minds reel at the very thought of the possible size of atomic destruction. This may actually be the mythical Armageddon!

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